

Habakkuk

The prophet who wrestled with God



SESSION 1: Background passages, mostly from 2 Kings 23 and 24

In times like these, you need an anchor...

Comment 1

Throughout human history, there have been times of turmoil and violence. Times when nations ran over other nations. Times when those with more power sought to bully and destroy those with less power so that those with more power could get their way in the world.

God's people have often found themselves living in the midst of such terror. As nations play their violent games—and as political leaders compromise with evil for the sake of their own survival—God's people have often found themselves longing for God's deliverance, God's hope, God's peace.

Comment 2

God's prophets have always spoken in a real time and in a real place. Often, it has been in the midst of a *hard* time and a *hard* place.

In such times, false prophets sometimes speak messages of encouragement, ignoring the fact that from God's perspective, there is no reason for encouragement. False prophets sometimes proclaim "God's blessing" on efforts which God would never bless.

Comment 3

The message of true prophets is harder—and often less popular. True prophets speak truth to power. And God's truth—and God's judgment—is something that those who are abusing human power would often like to avoid.

One of God's true prophets was a man named

Habakkuk. He lived in a *hard* time. He lived in a *hard* place. And though he was a man of God, he often found himself wrestling with God, wondering how long the violence and the suffering that he saw around him would continue. In a *hard* time and in a *hard* place, he wondered where God's hand of grace could be found.

Comment 4

Habakkuk was a real man in a real place. He struggled with real sorrows, real terrors, and real disappointments. He grieved over the state of the world—and over the state of nations.

Habakkuk lived about twenty-six hundred years ago, but in those twenty-six hundred years, the world has not much changed. And to understand something of the grief and terrors that he felt, we only have to look briefly at the political history of his times.

Comment 5

Habakkuk probably lived in or near Jerusalem, the capital of the small nation of Judah.

The larger nation of Israel, which once lay to the north of Judah, had been destroyed. Israel had thought it could survive on its name alone. Israel forgot that to be God's people you have to live like God's people. Israel forgot that there is no sacred protection for a nation that walks in the ways of violence and evil.

Comment 6

So at the time of Habakkuk, Israel is no more.

The small kingdom of Judah is still hanging on—but only by a thread.

A little earlier, under the leadership of King Josiah, Judah had undergone a temporary religious revival. That was in the year 622 B.C.E. Habakkuk had lived through that revival. Maybe he had even been affected by it.

But despite that righteous religious revival, God remembered the evil that Judah had done in the past, especially under the rule of King Manasseh. God remained deeply saddened and deeply angry over the blood that had been shed. A nation's past deeds are not easily erased.

Scripture to Read

2 Kings 23:1–5, 21, 25–27

For Discussion

How does it make you feel when you read that despite a religious revival, God is determined to overthrow the very people that in the past had enjoyed God's favor, abandoning even the temple where God's name had been honored and where God's own self has been worshipped? What lessons can we draw from this for our own day?

Comment 7

The religious revival led by King Josiah occurred in the year 622 B.C.E. But at that time, Judah was surrounded by powerful nations that expected to get their way in the world.

On the north was Assyria. On the south was Egypt. Like many small nations even today, Judah had fallen under the political sway of one of its powerful neighbors. In this case, it was Assyria.

Comment 8

Thirteen years after King Josiah's religious revival, in the year 609 B.C.E., Habakkuk watched in horror as a battle began brewing between Egypt and Assyria.

In those days, as today, when it came to fighting wars, the big nations of the world liked to do as little of the actual dirty work as possible. Whenever there was a chance of many deaths, it was better to make one of your smaller and weaker allies take the harshest risks.

Comment 9

So the people of Judah, along with King Josiah, found themselves helping the Assyrians fight off the Egyptians. It would not be surprising if the people of Judah were forced to do the worst of the fighting for the Assyrians.

A critical battle occurred at a place called Meggido, and in that battle, King Josiah was killed. We can only imagine Habakkuk's reaction as he heard the news. As a result, the people of Judah made Jehoahaz, one of Josiah's sons, king in his place.

Scripture to Read

2 Kings 23:29–30

Comment 10

As a result of the battle in which King Josiah died, Assyria lost its dominant role in the world. Egypt became stronger, at least temporarily. And Judah, like so many weak nations both before and after, fell under the sway of the new world leader: Egypt.

As it turned out, Egypt didn't like the man who had become king in Judah. Egypt demanded a change of governments. It wanted a ruler whom it could boss around, not somebody who would go his own way. So Egypt sent in its CIA—or the ancient equivalent. Jehoahaz, the king of Judah, was taken prisoner and carried into Egypt, where he conveniently “disappeared.”

Comment 11

The ruler of Egypt then named a new king of Judah—a different son of Josiah who would be more “cooperative” with Egypt. The new king imposed by Egypt was named Eliakim, but as a sign of its dominance, Egypt even changed his name. His name was changed to Jehoiakim.

Egypt's domination wasn't just political. It was also economic, for Egypt rapidly began appropriating the gold and silver of Judah for its own use. As Habakkuk watched in sorrow, the poor nation in which he lived was robbed of its economic resources in order to make a rich nation even richer. King Jehoiakim,

installed by the Egyptians, quietly went along with all of this.

Scripture to Read

2 Kings 23:31–37

For Discussion

Where do we see similar patterns in our world today? In what ways, if any, can this same pattern be repeated in personal and family relations?

Comment 12

Assyria had been knocked low by Egypt. And that created room for the nation of Babylon to get stronger. Soon Babylon was the dominate power in the area around Judah, and Jehoiakim, the puppet king of Judah, now found himself serving Babylon rather than Egypt.

After a few years, however, Jehoiakim got fed up with the Babylonians, who are also known in scripture as the “Chaldees” or “Chaldeans.” King Jehoiakim tried to rebel against Babylon, but by then, it was too late. He had long since sold his soul.

Comment 13

While Habakkuk watched in horror, nation after nation came against Judah. There were the Chaldees, the Syrians, the Moabites, and the Ammonites. Each sent bands of raiders and terrorists into the land of Judah, trying to destroy Judah so that they could claim what was left of the land for themselves.

It would have been a horrible time to be living in Jerusalem. You never knew who was going to come at you next. You would plant a little garden—and thugs from some other nation would come in and steal it. You would build a little house—and angry soldiers who suspected you of collaborating with the “enemy” would knock it to the ground.

Comment 14

Similar things happen in almost every war.

After U.S. troops invaded Afghanistan in an effort to find and destroy the Taliban, there were news reports of poor families, caught in a war

that they didn’t want, being forced to sell some of their young children just to get a few bags of wheat to feed the children who remained.

Struggling families in Darfur, caught between competing political and ethnic groups, have endured rapes of young girls, forced enlistments of young boys, and terrifying slaughters of women and children, all aimed at driving people out of their homeland so that someone else can get access to its resources.

Scripture to Read

Revelation 18:24

Comment 15

As the people of Judah endured terror and oppression at the hands of neighboring powers, God’s prophets declared a very uncomfortable truth, a truth which people didn’t want to hear. These prophets said that the work of the foreign terrorists was “at the commandment of the Lord.” They said that the suffering that Judah was enduring was a judgment of God on their once-blessed nation. It was because of the way that their nation of Judah had shed innocent blood—blood which “the Lord would not pardon.”

A similar theme appears much later in the book of Revelation, where judgment is pronounced on the Roman Empire because of all those whom that powerful nation had “slain upon the earth.”

From a biblical perspective, the shedding of blood is not something that God takes lightly. God doesn’t just look the other way and say, “Oh, well, these things happen.”

Scripture to Read

2 Kings 24:1–4

For Discussion

What do you think verse 4 means when it says that there were sins from the past that the Lord “would not pardon”? Do you think we are supposed to interpret “would not” as different from “could not”?

Elsewhere in scripture there seem to be statements that suggest that there is no sin that can-

not be forgiven. Yet here in 2 Kings, there is a suggestion that, despite a religious revival, God is simply not willing to forgive the nation's massive shedding of blood, even though the slaughter occurred many decades earlier. What should we believe about God's ability—or willingness—to pardon the sins of a nation?

We live in a country that practiced slavery for three hundred years, a country that systematically stole the land of native peoples and took actions that resulted in the deaths of millions of those native people, a country that early in 1945 dropped napalm on 16 square miles of Tokyo, deliberately incinerating one hundred thousand civilians. All of that was many years ago, but it's still a part of this nation's past, and our nation's current actions aren't always entirely admirable as well. In light of what we've read in 2 Kings, what should we expect God's response to be to a nation such as ours?

Scripture to Read

2 Kings 24:10–16

Comment 16

The days in which Habakkuk was serving as God's prophet were horrible in every way. But Habakkuk wasn't serving alone. These were also the days of Jeremiah, who is sometimes known as "the weeping prophet."

Portions of Jeremiah tell us about the terrible deeds that were done in those days of King Jehoiakim, who served first as a violent puppet of Egypt and then as a violent puppet of Babylon, before finally being betrayed by both of those nations.

Scripture to Read

Jeremiah 26:20–23

Comment 17

Like so many who play at power, King Jehoiakim couldn't tolerate criticism. Anyone who spoke against the king's actions was giving "comfort to the enemy."

It wasn't "patriotic" to speak God's word if it didn't support what the government was doing.

Comment 18

One day, King Jehoiakim heard a prophet named Urijah speaking out against Jerusalem and its ways. The prophet Urijah was a friend of Jeremiah's, and the government in Jerusalem rose up, planning to put Urijah to death. The government didn't want anyone to speak words like he had spoken.

Urijah fled to Egypt, but the authorities in Jerusalem sent agents after him. When they finally found him, they brought him back to Jerusalem, where King Jehoiakim personally killed him and then had his dead body tossed into an open grave.

These were the times in which the prophet Habakkuk lived.

For Discussion

How is what happened to Urijah similar or different from what happens to God's faithful servants today? What sustains God's people under conditions like these?

Comment 19

Sometimes God's people find themselves living in relatively peaceful circumstances. Sometimes it seems like "trouble" is a thing of the past. Sometimes it seems like we've gotten past all of that. But then, when we least expect it, Satan comes at us again. Our world erupts in violence and war. Nations and powers engage in the same old deadly struggles. And those who speak and work for peace are shut down and shut out.

We can be blown away by such attacks if we are not ready, if we are not gripping the solid rock. As a hymn by Ruth Caye Jones puts it:

*In times like these, you need a Savior;
in times like these, you need an anchor.*

*Be very sure, be very sure,
your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!*

Habakkuk

The prophet who wrestled with God



SESSION 2: Habakkuk 1:1–4

*Author of faith, to thee I lift
my weary, longing eyes!*

Comment 1

As we saw in Session 1, the prophet Habakkuk lived during terrible times. We don't know exactly when he was born, but it was about 2,600 years ago. It is likely that early in his life, he either experienced or learned about the great religious revival that apparently occurred in Judah during the reign of King Josiah.

But later in his life, this good king got caught in the power games of bigger nations—nations that were struggling against each other to control more and more of the world. Josiah was forced to go to war on behalf of Assyria, the big nation to the northeast of Judah. And in that tragic battle, he was killed by the Egyptians.

Comment 2

Judah appointed a new king, but by then, Egypt was arrogantly expecting to get its way in that part of the world. And Egypt didn't like the new king that was installed.

So, somewhat like the United States deciding to get rid of Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq, Egypt sent its agents into Judah. Before long, they captured Judah's new king and carried him off to Egypt, where he either died or was killed.

Egypt then appointed a different son of Josiah

as king over Judah, a son who would know that he needed to bow to Egyptian demands.

Comment 3

The king appointed by Egypt was named Jehoiakim. But before long, a new power appeared on the scene named Babylon. And Babylon now demanded that Jehoiakim bow to *its* demands rather than Egypt's.

The people of Judah were no longer really free. As a little nation, Judah was constantly bossed around by big bullies who stripped it of its resources and of its wealth.

Raiders and terrorists from surrounding nations invaded whenever they felt like it, taking whatever they could find. There was chaos and destruction everywhere. People were afraid, doing anything that they could to survive.

Comment 4

People wondered how God could let all this happen. God's prophets had an answer. They said it was because of the "innocent blood" that had been shed decades earlier by the strong-willed King Manasseh, a ruler who did great evil in the sight of God.

Manasseh was cruel and violent. He didn't care whom he killed. And now, decades later, the

old sins of the nation had come back to haunt it.

Comment 5

The average person had not done this evil. Many in Habakkuk's day were probably kind and loving toward their neighbors. Many were probably trying to worship God as faithfully and honestly as they knew how. Yet they found themselves part of a nation that had blood on its hands.

Certain individuals may have deeply felt God's presence, but it had become clear that because of its past and present sins, the nation as a nation was no longer worthy of God's blessing. No amount of flags or bumper stickers would change that.

Scripture to Read

Jeremiah 22:13–21

Comment 6

The prophet Jeremiah lived in the same time period as Habakkuk, and we can learn something about what was happening through descriptions that we find in the book of Jeremiah.

It's clear from scripture that Judah had a terrible legacy of evil. It had a history of injustice, a history of violence, a history of going its own way. Again and again, innocent blood had been shed. Again and again, it had spat in the face of its Lord.

Comment 7

There was no reason for God not to rise up against Judah. By doing justice and treating others rightly, the good King Josiah had saved his nation from God's judgment. But it was not permanent deliverance. The legacy of shedding innocent blood had not been erased. The history of Judah's past wrongful actions was still a heavy weight around its neck.

In the midst of their blood, Josiah's sons—including King Jehoiakim—built a grand house for themselves. And according to Jeremiah, they built it through “unrighteousness.”

Comment 8

By building a grand palace for themselves by means of “unrighteousness,” the sons of Josiah unleashed the “righteous” anger of a holy God, a God who saw not only their sins but also the sins of a nation that had done great evil many long years before.

According to Jeremiah, in order to build his grand home, King Jehoiakim cheated his neighbors out of their rightful wages. While building a lavish governing palace for himself, Jehoiakim denied much needed benefits to his suffering people. He tolerated oppression and violence—and even participated himself in the shedding of blood.

Comment 9

According to Jeremiah, it was through actions such as these that King Jehoiakim took upon himself not only his own government's sins but the sins of so many governments before him.

Perhaps if Jehoiakim had ruled rightly, God might have been willing to pardon the nation. Perhaps if Jehoiakim had led the nation in taking up the cause of the poor and the needy, God might not have been so focused on the sins of the past. But King Jehoiakim chose otherwise. And Jehoiakim's tragic choice caused God to “command” raiders and terrorists and even foreign armies to rise up against him.

Scripture to Read

Jeremiah 7:1–4

Comment 10

It wasn't just the government that was behaving badly. Many ordinary folks followed the government's example. So Jeremiah was commissioned to stand at the gates of the Temple and proclaim the word of the Lord to all who would enter there.

These good religious folk thought that just because they made their way to the Temple, they could get away with cheating, economic oppres-

sion, the withholding of wages, and the shedding of blood.

Comment 11

For too long, says Jeremiah, the people of Judah had listened to “lying words.” For too long, they had listened to the government’s propaganda. For too long, they had assumed that they were protected and blessed forever, simply because within their city walls stood “the Temple of the Lord.”

Again and again, they tried to reassure themselves by repeating, over and over, “The Temple of the Lord! The Temple of the Lord!”

Comment 12

The people of Judah thought that the presence of the Temple of the Lord was their salvation. Their attitude is perhaps similar to those who think that the United States will be blessed if it simply puts the words “In God we trust” on its coins or posts the Ten Commandments on the walls of its schools.

The people of Judah had forgotten that words and temples aren’t what matter. “Amend your ways and your doings,” says the prophet, for only then will you dwell secure in your land!

Scripture to Read

Jeremiah 7:5–7

For Discussion

These days, almost every nation thinks it has an inherent right to dwell secure in its own land and an inherent right to take whatever actions it wants against those who might threaten its security. But according to Jeremiah, what is it that gives a nation the right to dwell secure in an earth that is the Lord’s?

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:1

Comment 13

The book of Habakkuk is different from many other books of the prophets. For example, Habakkuk spends no time introducing himself. Unlike many of the other prophets, he doesn’t tell us how he makes his living or what his father’s name was. There’s no mention even of where he’s living.

Nor does Habakkuk ever make any grand pronouncements, using the common phrase of so many prophets: “Thus says the Lord...”

Comment 14

Yet, despite the absence of any detailed background information on the prophet, Habakkuk is a very personal book. It reflects the human anguish and personal struggle of a servant of the Lord who is living in a very difficult time.

Like Job, Habakkuk lets us enter into his deeply felt conversations with God. Through these conversations, we learn that the God of creation is indeed also the God of history—and that even in the most terrifying of times, faith and mercy and right living can carry us through.

Comment 15

In the King James Version, the first verse of Habakkuk begins by saying that the words which follow are the “burden” which Habakkuk the prophet did see. Other translations refer to it as an “oracle” or a “proclamation.”

But when we put all of these words together, we get a fuller sense of what the Hebrew word implies.

Comment 16

Like the author of the book of Revelation, the prophet Habakkuk has seen a vision. And in that vision, he has been given a pronouncement that he is to carry to God’s people. However, it’s not an easy proclamation to deliver. It’s more like a “burden” that he has been asked to lug to those who would rather listen to “lying words” than re-

flect on God's truth.

In fact, the vision that Habakkuk has seen is a hard truth even for him. He's not sure he wants to accept it. So, as we will see, he sometimes calls out to God, wondering what in the world God is doing in these awful times in which he lives.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:2

For Discussion

What sorts of feelings seem to be present in this verse? Under what circumstances do people today have similar feelings and questions for God?

Comment 17

The second verse of Habakkuk overflows with a deep passion. Habakkuk seems exhausted. He seems desperate. He seems on the verge of despair. There may even be doubt running in circles around his heart, eagerly looking for a way to get inside him. There may be fears of all kinds bubbling within him. There may even be a lingering sense of betrayal.

But Habakkuk is a servant of God—and a person of prayer. He doesn't go off and pout. He doesn't throw an angry fit and curse his Maker. Instead, he goes to prayer. He shares his deepest feelings and questions with the One who is his Rock. He doesn't pretend that all is right in his soul. Instead, he is fully honest with God.

Comment 18

In the most public of fashions, Habakkuk prays. "O Lord," he cries, "how long must I cry 'Help!' and you don't answer? How long must I scream 'Violence!' and you don't come to save? How long, O Lord? How long?"

Habakkuk is not alone in these feelings. He is not alone in these questions. All through history, there have been times when God's people have felt a similar anguish, times when it seemed like

God was too silent, when it seemed like God was too absent.

For Discussion

Can you think of times when for you or for someone you know, God has seemed silent or seemed absent? How should one deal with those feelings when they come?

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:3a

For Discussion

What do you think lies behind the questions that Habakkuk is raising here in the first half of this verse? What is it that is disturbing him? In what other kinds of situations might people have felt similar questions—and a similar pain?

Comment 19

The first half of verse 3 offers two profound but intertwined questions.

Habakkuk's first question in this verse is, "Why do you show me iniquity?" Habakkuk is asking God why he is being forced to see so much unrestrained evil at work in the world around him.

Comment 20

Many in our world respond to evil by pretending it doesn't exist—or isn't too bad. Sociologists and psychologists sometimes refer to people living in "states of denial."

For example, an estimated 38,000 children die every year around the world from hunger and diseases caused by poverty and malnutrition. Hundreds of millions of people in Africa live on less than \$2 a day. The bargain clothes that we buy on sale are often made by children working 14-hour days for little or no pay.

We know these things, but we don't really let them enter our consciousness.

Comment 21

In like manner, during its initial bombing campaigns in Afghanistan, the Pentagon was careful to prevent U.S. reporters from getting access to any information on civilian casualties. And for years, Israel has done its best to keep foreign reporters and independent observers away from its military assault on the Palestinians. It wants the world to see as little as possible.

But the evil around him was abundantly clear to Habakkuk. The “iniquity” of his world had become a burden that was hard to bear.

Comment 22

Habakkuk would rather not have seen the evil around him. He would rather have lived a nice, comfortable life away from any knowledge of the greed and blood and hate that underlies our world. But again and again, God opened his eyes. He couldn’t miss it. It was everywhere he looked—and it left him in pain.

“Why do you make me see iniquity?” he cried. “Why can’t you let me be like those who quietly pretend that ‘things aren’t so bad’?”

For Discussion

Why is it that some people in our world are so aware of the sorrow and evil, while others are so blind? How can we improve our level of awareness?

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:3b

Comment 23

In some translations, the second question found in verse 3 sounds like a repeat of the first question, which was very much about himself. But in other translations, the second question is more of a wondering aloud about God. How is it, Habakkuk wonders, that you, O Lord, can stand seeing so much sorrow and evil?

It’s almost as if Habakkuk is wondering how it

is that the Holy One can manage to look upon so much evil every day. Habakkuk knows how painful it is to himself. He imagines that it must be all the more painful to God. How can God stand it, he wonders. Why doesn’t God do something?

Comment 24

We humans may sometimes be able to close our eyes to the truth. We humans may sometimes be able to pretend that everything is getting better and better.

But God sees every sparrow that falls. God weeps over every child killed by exploding bombs or advancing tanks. God anguishes over every woman who suffers abuse or hunger. And God grieves over every laborer who is paid poorly so that some corporate executive can be offered a bigger salary or higher bonus.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:3–4

Comment 25

After raising his questions, the prophet begins to comment to God about what he has been seeing around him. And in his comments, we discover something about how Habakkuk sees the world.

First, wherever he looks, there is raiding and violence. Armed thugs invade Judah to steal and to rob—and the government itself behaves in the same way. Strife and contention are everywhere. There’s a war underway—a war with no definable end, a war that sucks up every resource and leaves the whole land in misery.

Comment 26

“This is why decision fails,” says Habakkuk. The law goes slack, and justice never emerges. In Habakkuk’s eyes, until there is peace, there will be no justice. Perhaps he sometimes wonders if the endless war in which his nation is involved is partly just an excuse to bury justice and the rule

of law once and for all.

Habakkuk's understanding of the destructive effect of violence is perhaps similar to that of Dr. Martin Luther King. Habakkuk sees that with violence and war in the air, the villain hedges in those who are just. With violence and war in the air, judgment is deformed—and hopes are dashed.

Comment 27

The first four verses of this short book drip with pain and sorrow. The first four verses overflow with anguished questions.

But in these first four verses, we are also given a remarkable gift. In these first four verses, we uncover a portrait of a human being much like ourselves. It's a human being who sees the world clearly—and is deeply burdened by what he sees. It's a human being struggling to grasp hold of faith in the midst of some raw and awful horrors.

Comment 28

The first four verses are a gift because in them Habakkuk acknowledges that it is *hard* to have faith. He acknowledges that when times are rough, despair and desperation are natural

human responses, even for those who are God's loyal servants.

But he demonstrates as well that when we are feeling overwhelmed and overcome, it is to God that we should turn—even when we feel that God has been silent, even when we feel that God has not answered our most frantic cry.

Comment 29

Perhaps Habakkuk knows the truth that Charles Wesley later expressed in his famous hymn, "Father, I Stretch My Hands to Thee." Perhaps Habakkuk knows that when our hopes are battered—and when all other help has failed—there is still One to whom we can turn.

There is still a God who will hear our most honest plea and our most fervent complaint. There is a God who will restore our faith and keep us moving in God's own way, doing God's own work—even when the violence and injustice around us seem impossible to bear.

And perhaps that's why one verse of Charles Wesley's hymn includes words like these:

*Author of faith, to thee I lift
my weary, longing eyes!
O let me now receive that gift—
my soul without it dies!*

Habakkuk

The prophet who wrestled with God



SESSION 3: *Habakkuk 1:5–17*

Morning by morning, new mercies I see!

Comment 1

The prophet Habakkuk lived in the nation of Judah about 2,600 years ago. It was a hard time to be living—and a hard time to be serving as a messenger for God.

The nation of Judah was fast fading away. The country was being overrun by bigger powers with tougher armies. Raiders and thugs ran through the land, stealing and destroying everything in sight.

Comment 2

For a while, Judah's kings tried the "get tough" approach. They shed much blood in their effort to maintain control. Then, for a while, Judah's kings tried the "get smart" approach. They made alliances with whichever foreign nation seemed like it might protect them.

But in "getting tough" and in "getting smart," Judah had set God aside, and by going its own way, Judah had set itself up for destruction. Hundreds of years later, a Jewish teacher named Jesus would put it this way: Those who seek to "save" their lives by compromising with evil are the ones who end up losing their lives.

Comment 3

Back in Habakkuk's day, the people of Judah thought they were safe. Despite the violence and destruction around them, they thought they would triumph in the end.

Both the common people and the governing

rulers believed the "lying words" of false religious leaders. These religious leaders told them that God had promised that Judah would be forever blest. People thought that as long as they had God's temple in their borders, no harm would come to them. They thought that lying words and pious temples would protect them. They forgot that what God wanted was faithful living and trusting obedience.

Comment 4

The book of Habakkuk seems to have been written in the final years before the fall of Judah. It speaks to a time shortly before the people of Judah were carried off into captivity.

In some ways, the book of Habakkuk reads like a personal dialogue with God. But some scholars think that it may have actually been used as part of a service of worship, a service in which Habakkuk the prophet begins by voicing the fears and doubts and questions of the people—and then it's as if the prophet Habakkuk provides God's answer.

Comment 5

In any case, there is a depth of emotion in this book that clearly reflects the anguish of a very hard time.

Habakkuk and Jeremiah served in the same general time period. Jeremiah is sometimes called "the weeping prophet," and the writings of Habakkuk and Jeremiah grow out of the same

painful period of Judah's history.

The book of Lamentations has traditionally been connected with this time period as well. It's a poetic reflection on the awful events of this time period. It's a kind of extended "blues," a song describing the horror of what happened when Judah chose the ways of evil rather than the ways of good.

Scripture to Read

Lamentations 1:1–2

Lamentations 2:5–6

Lamentations 2:15–16

Comment 6

As we saw last time, at a time when all of Judah is in mourning, at a time when all of Judah is waiting like there is no tomorrow, Habakkuk turns to God in prayer.

Habakkuk doesn't hide his questions. He is honest about his pain. He asks, "How long must I cry for help—and get no answer?" He asks, "How long must I scream to you, O Lord, about the violence that never ends—and you don't save?"

Comment 7

Seeing this degree of evil is a burden for Habakkuk. He wonders aloud how God can go on day after day, year after year, seeing the violence and destruction of our world. "It's too awful!" says Habakkuk. "How can you stand it, O Lord?"

But as we are about to see, after Habakkuk has asked his questions and uttered his complaint, God speaks. God's answer isn't the answer that Habakkuk has been seeking. But Habakkuk reports it nonetheless, for he is an *honest* prophet, not a lying prophet. He is a *true* prophet, not a false prophet.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:5

For Discussion

What does God tell Habakkuk to do? In what

ways should we do the same in our own day?

Comment 8

God responds to Habakkuk's plea with three instructions.

In the King James Version, the first instruction is "Behold ye among the heathen."

In other words, Habakkuk is told to **LOOK** among the nations. There is something important about the world that God wants Habakkuk to see, something that requires him to look beyond his own world.

Comment 9

In the King James Version the second instruction to Habakkuk is to "Regard."

In other words, Habakkuk is told to **OBSERVE THOUGHTFULLY** what is happening in the world. He is to think on what he sees. He is to let it enter into his deepest thought processes.

Comment 10

In the King James Version, the third instruction to Habakkuk is "Wonder marvelously."

In other words, Habakkuk is told to let what he sees have an impact on him. A contemporary Jewish translation puts God's instruction this way: "**BE UTTERLY ASTOUNDED.**" In other words, God believes that when Habakkuk thinks carefully about what he sees, he will be overwhelmed with awe and fear and amazement.

Comment 11

Scripture includes many instances of people following these three instructions that are given to Habakkuk. For example, in the Gospel of Mark, a group of weeping women come to put spices on the dead body of Jesus, believing that they will find his corpse in the tomb. According to Mark, they **LOOK** inside—and see that the tomb is empty. Then they **OBSERVE THOUGHTFULLY**, carefully thinking through the meaning of what they see (and don't see). Finally, they allow themselves to be **UTTERLY ASTOUNDED.**

The women in Mark are so overwhelmed

that they “tremble” in awe. Then they run, saying nothing, for the impact is utterly overwhelming.

Comment 12

The three instructions that God gives to Habakkuk are what God asks of all who are on the verge of losing hope.

When evil seems strong, when violence is everywhere, when the whole world seems to be going wrong, we are to **LOOK** where we haven't yet thought to look. And we aren't just to look casually—or quickly. We're to linger a little. We're to **OBSERVE THOUGHTFULLY**. And then we need to be prepared to **BE UTTERLY ASTOUNDED** at what we see. We need to be ready to tremble in awe at the God whose power never fails, the God whose hand is never still, the God who can undermine the ranting of even the greatest of nations.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:5

Comment 13

God's power is often made manifest in ways we don't expect. This seems to have been the case for Habakkuk. Perhaps it is also the case for us.

In the answer to Habakkuk's complaint, God says, “I will work a work in your days which ye will not believe, even if I told you.” In other words, that which God is doing is hard to believe—even for a honest prophet like Habakkuk.

Comment 14

The Gospels provide further examples of how hard it is to believe what God is doing.

According to the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly tells his disciples that he will be cut down by the Roman authorities, and that God will raise him up. God will open the tomb. But again and again, the disciples don't believe it. It doesn't matter that he says it. They simply don't believe it. Deep down inside, it seems too far fetched to accept.

Comment 15

According to Habakkuk 1:5, the work that

God is doing is not far off. It's not confined to “the last days.” It's not just for the “by and by.” It's for now.

That makes God's answer to Habakkuk as important for us as for Habakkuk. Our lives may be falling apart. Tensions and disagreements may be tearing apart our families. Violence may be bringing senseless destruction to those whom we love or admire. Nations may be going to war with other nations. Rulers and governments may be showing a callous disregard for the needs of the poor and the disabled. But God says to us, just as God said to Habakkuk, “I will work a work in *your* days.” Not later but now.

For Discussion

Why do so many people find it hard to believe that God's power is really at work in all the world, even in our own day?

What would it take for all of us to do a better job of looking, observing thoughtfully, and then being utterly astounded—like those women who peered into Jesus' empty tomb?

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:6

Comment 16

This verse continues God's answer to Habakkuk, but God's words would have been deeply shocking to Habakkuk and to anyone who lived in his day.

Habakkuk is told that God is going to “raise up” the Chaldeans. The Chaldeans are also known as the Babylonians. And, as the King James Version puts it, this is a “bitter and hasty nation.” The Chaldeans are fierce. They jump off the handle at a moment's notice. They seldom pause before unleashing the terrible weapons at their disposal.

Comment 17

In Habakkuk's day, the Chaldeans were a nation of people who marched anywhere they wanted, taking over houses and lands that were

not theirs. They were arrogant, violent, ruthless—bullies, determined to get their way in the world.

Yet here is God saying, “I am raising up the Chaldeans.” It’s not in the future tense. It’s in the *present* tense. The implication is clear: those awful Chaldeans are going to march all over Judah—and tear it to pieces.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:7

Comment 18

God isn’t fooled. God knows how terrible the Chaldeans are. They make their own laws and live by their own rules.

For years, the United States has opposed the establishment of an International Court for Human Rights, even though almost every other nation in the world has supported such a court. Leaders in Washington say they feared that someone will try to hold the United States accountable for its actions around the world. In like manner, the Bush administration has said that it won’t abide by any past treaty with other nations that might be interpreted as hindering its ability to do whatever it wants.

The Chaldeans were similar. They did what they wanted, inspiring dread in the rest of the world. It was almost as if they saw themselves as their own god. And so the text describes their “dignity” as a dignity of their own making.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:8

Comment 19

Babylonia was a great military power. Its “horses” were the tools of its military advance. Its soldiers would run like “pouncing leopards.” In seeking victims, its military was fiercer than “wolves.” Its armies were like eagles or “vultures,” swooping from afar whenever they spotted something weak enough to kill and devour.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:9–10

Comment 20

God doesn’t mince words in describing the Chaldeans. God knows the evil that they do. They march through the world, bent on violence. They never turn back. They just keep on coming.

They take so many prisoners that they are like grains of “sand” on the shore of the sea. They bind and chain their prisoners and haul them off as captives to foreign lands, where they are made to live in humiliating conditions from which there is no escape. They “scoff” at other nations’ rulers. They treat their enemies like a joke, laughing at the efforts of others to protect themselves.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:11

Comment 21

These Chaldeans believe only in themselves. They rape a neighboring nation, then move on like the wind, pursuing whatever new amusement enters their mind. The King James Version says that they worship their own power as if it were their god.

This is a nation that believes that its own might makes right. Yet this is the nation that God is “raising up.” This is the nation that will leap like a leopard onto the cities and villages of Judah. This is the nation that will swoop like a vulture to destroy Jerusalem. This is the wolf that will tear Judah apart.

Comment 22

Habakkuk wonders how this could be. How could God “raise up” a nation such as this to do violence to God’s own temple?

And so, as we are about to see, Habakkuk begins to question God further. To Habakkuk, it seems as if God must be making some kind of tragic mistake.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:12

Comment 23

Habakkuk is baffled. To his way of thinking, God's answer doesn't fit with what he knows of God. So in responding to God, Habakkuk repeats what he believes about God's character. "Have I got it wrong?" he wonders.

"O Lord," he says, "you are from everlasting—aren't you? You have been my God, my Holy One," he says. "And you are forever—aren't you?"

Comment 24

The King James Version also portrays Habakkuk as saying, "We shall not die," but we know, of course, that humans *do* die. So these words seem rather puzzling.

As it turns out, some more ancient manuscripts of Habakkuk—manuscripts that weren't available to the translators of the King James Version—portray Habakkuk as saying something that makes more sense. In these more ancient manuscripts, Habakkuk says, "O Lord, *you* do not die." In other words, Habakkuk is saying, "O Lord, you won't leave us—will you?"

Finally, Habakkuk turns to God and says, "These Chaldeans are the kind of people whom you have complained about in the past—aren't they? O Mighty Rock, the Chaldeans are the kind of nation that you *restrain*—are they not?"

For Discussion

What do you think lies behind Habakkuk's words to God? In what kinds of circumstances do we raise similar questions?

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:13

Comment 25

"O Lord," says Habakkuk, "your eyes are too pure to look at evil—aren't they? You can't stomach wrong doing—can you? You can't put up with treachery—can you?"

"I know you too well," says Habakkuk. "Or I *think* I do. You don't stand idly by while wrong doers devour the righteous—do you?"

Comment 26

"So how," asks Habakkuk, "can you 'raise up' this wicked and terrible nation, this arrogant people who worship their own might and power?"

"How can you let such a people destroy this nation of Judah?" asks Habakkuk. "O Lord, how can you let them undo all of the good that you have done here for so many generations? How can you let them destroy your own temple?"

Scripture to Read

Psalms 8:3–9

Habakkuk 1:14–15

Comment 27

Habakkuk continues wrestling with God. He is struggling deep in his own soul with what he sees in the world. Habakkuk talks out his struggles with God, for he knows that God understands the questions that trouble our hearts. He knows that God understands the haunting sorrows that can so easily weaken our spirits.

"O Lord," says Habakkuk, echoing portions of Psalm 8, "you have made us. You have made us only a little lower than the angels. We are your creation. We have been given your dignity and your grace. Yet we are like fish, swimming in the sea, and the iron-fisted, mean-spirited ruler of the Chaldeans—King Nebuchadnezzar—he sits over the sea with a fishing hook and a great net."

Comment 28

"O Lord," says Habakkuk, "the ruler of the Chaldeans is making a mockery of your creation. He is catching us on his hooks and trapping us in his nets. He is pulling us up out of the 'sea' in which you placed us, throwing us into his boat—and laughing with glee, rejoicing over his catch."

"O Lord, my Lord," says Habakkuk, "how can you let this evil man undermine your glory and your creation? Do you forget that you made us?"

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 1:16–17

Comment 29

“O Lord,” says Habakkuk, “these Chaldeans, these mighty warriors, they are worshiping their own might. They are worshiping their destruction of your creation!”

We don’t know how the Chaldeans set their budgets or spent their resources. But we do know that military spending in the United States is many times the spending of any other nation on earth. Economists are already saying that the direct and indirect costs of the war in Iraq have reached \$2 trillion, and with each day that the war continues, these costs continue to climb.

It’s likely that a similar pattern prevailed in Babylonia. Endless wars don’t come cheap.

Comment 30

In talking with God, Habakkuk describes the priorities of the Chaldeans in language that is both colorful—and pointed.

He says that the Chaldeans offer “sacrifices unto their nets” and that they “burn incense” unto their fishing boats. For Habakkuk, the Chaldeans’ “nets” and “fishing boats” are their tools of war, their tools for “capturing” other nations. Through his colorful language, Habakkuk reminds God that the Chaldeans worship their military power. It’s through their domination of others that they have become “fat.” It is through their slaying of other nations that their own wealth has been built.

“O Lord,” cries Habakkuk, “you won’t allow an evil nation such as this to overrun our struggling nation of Judah—will you?”

Scripture to Read

Lamentations 3:46–57

Lamentations 3:31–36

Lamentations 3:21–23

Comment 31

As Habakkuk speaks with God, we can feel

his anguish. We can feel his struggle. He seems to be disputing with God. But in his plea, we find an echo of hope, for in times of deepest despair, he knows to whom he should turn.

He knows, as the author of Lamentations knows, that when our eyes are running with great rivers of tears, when we feel that desolation and destruction have come upon us, there is still One whose compassions fail not. There is still a God to whom we can sing, “Great is thy faithfulness,” a God whose mercies are new every morning.

Comment 32

It will be a while before Habakkuk’s ongoing conversation with God yields the deeper understanding that he seeks. Habakkuk does not yet know how to put together the pieces of what he sees and the truth of what he has heard.

But through it all, he keeps talking with God. Through it all, he keeps turning to the One in whom his life is anchored.

One of Andrae Crouch’s songs expresses a similar thought:

I’ve had many tears and sorrows; I’ve had questions for tomorrow. There’ve been times I didn’t know right from wrong. But in every situation, God gave me blessed consolation, that my trials only come to make me strong.

Through it all, through it all, I’ve learned to trust in Jesus, I’ve learned to trust in God: through it all, through it all, I’ve learned to depend upon his word...

Habakkuk

The prophet who wrestled with God



SESSION 4: Habakkuk 2:1-11

Naught of earth unmoved can stand

Comment 1

The prophet Habakkuk has been given a vision in which he sees the nation of Judah being destroyed by the nation of Babylon, which some Bibles translate as “the Chaldeans.”

There is no doubt that the nation of Judah has been wicked. The prophet knows that Judah has blood on its hands. The prophet knows that Judah’s rulers have been violent and greedy. He knows that many innocent people have suffered as a result of his nation’s wickedness.

Comment 2

But Habakkuk is disturbed because the nation of Babylon is even more wicked than Judah. It is even more violent. It is the big bully in that part of the world. It kills and slaughters. It takes people captive. It puts others into slavery. It steals the wealth of its neighbors. It is proud and arrogant—and bent on destruction.

Habakkuk goes to God, wondering how God could allow such a very wicked nation to destroy the people who once enjoyed God’s blessing. Habakkuk goes to God, wondering how God could allow Babylon to come into Jerusalem and tear to pieces the very temple in which the Holy One had been worshipped.

Comment 3

As Habakkuk prays, he struggles with God. His questions for God are the same questions that have been asked by many individuals down

through the ages.

O Lord, he prays, if you are holy, how can you allow such unholy nations to get their way in the world?

O Lord, he prays, if your eyes are too pure to behold evil, how can you stand to look at such wickedness?

O Lord, he prays, Judah may have done wrong, but Babylon has done even more wrong. So how can you hold your tongue when a nation of great wickedness devours a nation of less wickedness?

Scripture to Read

Ezekiel 33:7

Habakkuk 2:1

Comment 4

In biblical days, there were no phones. There were no radios. There was no e-mail or electronic message systems. News was passed from place to place by messengers and by signals of various sorts.

Sometimes watchers would be assigned to stand alone in a high place, waiting for some signal, waiting for some news from afar. They might stand on a city wall or on a high bluff or on some other place with good visibility. But they weren’t just getting the message for themselves. As soon as they received it, they were to run into the city or the village or the community and spread the word exactly as they had heard it or seen it.

Comment 5

In various parts of the scriptures, those who wait for a word from the Lord are compared to those who serve as watchers, waiting for a word from afar—a word that they will share with all who are waiting to hear.

At least twice in the book of Ezekiel, the prophet Ezekiel is told to serve as a “watchman,” waiting for a message from the Lord.

Comment 6

This same imagery occurs other places in scripture as well.

Here in Habakkuk, we find the prophet conveying certain doubts and questions to God. After posing these questions, Habakkuk declares that he is now ready to take up his post. He will stand on a high place and keep his eyes fixed on heaven, so to speak. In other words, he’ll be waiting to hear God’s answer. He’ll be waiting to see how the Holy One will respond to the anguish and sorrow that he has spoken on behalf of the whole people of Judah.

For Discussion

What can we learn about Habakkuk from his statements in 2:1?

In what sense, if any, is it still important for us today to go up unto a “watchtower” to hear a word from the Lord? What forms might that “watchtower” take?

Scripture to Read

Isaiah 30:8

Habakkuk 2:2

For Discussion

Why do you think Habakkuk is told to write the vision and make it plain?

What can we do today to communicate God’s ways more clearly and more effectively?

Comment 7

Sometimes spoken words are not enough. Sometimes preachers and prophets speak in vain.

Sometimes the glitter of TV religion gets in the way of communicating a true word from the Lord. Sometimes radio evangelists just fade into the background.

So the Lord tells Habakkuk to take the vision that he’s been given and translate it into words. Habakkuk is to write those words on a “tablet.” He is to write them on a stone or other large object. He is to make his words so clear and so plain that even someone who is merely running past the stone can read and understand the word of the Lord.

Comment 8

There may have been another motivation as well, for a vision written on a “tablet” is a vision that endures. The vision that was given to Habakkuk was not just for him. Nor was it a vision just for the people of his day. The vision given to Habakkuk embodied truths that would need to be heard from generation to generation.

Write it down, says God. Don’t let it be missed. Put it out there—where anyone can see it, where anyone can hear it.

Scripture to Read

Ecclesiastes 3:1

Habakkuk 2:3

Comment 9

In the Jewish scriptures, Ecclesiastes is classified as one of the “writings.” It’s a book of “wisdom.” And according to one of the most well-known verses in Ecclesiastes, to every thing there is a season—and a time to every purpose under heaven.

On one level, Ecclesiastes is saying that there is a time and a “season” for everything that happens. But on a deeper level, Ecclesiastes is saying that the times and the seasons are appointed by heaven. It is God, and not we, who choose them.

Comment 10

In like manner, God tells Habakkuk that he is being given a vision, a vision that goes beyond

the present, a vision that reaches into the future.

In other words, Habakkuk's questions—like so many questions that we too convey to God—have been too short-sighted, too tied to the present. Habakkuk is told that he needs to look deeper and longer. God's work in history may seem incomplete. Evil may seem like it has the upper hand. But wait, says God. Tarry a little while, for the fullness of God's action is on its way. The season has been set. The time has been appointed. It will surely come. Even now, it is panting at the door. Even now, it is hastening toward the end.

Habakkuk is told that there will be no delay, for when the timing is God's, everything happens "right on time."

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:4

Comment 11

This verse is a critical part of the answer that God gives to Habakkuk. But its full significance will not be apparent until we get farther along in the text.

For now, however, it's important to see the contrast that is being presented in this verse.

Comment 12

In some translations, the contrast that is being presented in this verse is a bit confusing. The King James Version, for example, begins by talking about a soul that is "lifted up," which sounds like a good thing from a spiritual perspective. But then we are told that this soul is "not upright," which sounds like a bad thing from a spiritual perspective.

We can get a better sense of what this verse is really saying by putting it into today's terminology. We might talk, for example, about someone whose spirit is "puffed up," someone who is "full of himself" or someone who is "full of hot air." And that's what the King James Version means here when it talks about a person whose soul is "lifted up."

Comment 13

Likewise, Habakkuk 2:4 indicates that the person whose soul is "lifted up" is "not upright." In other words, some people have an exalted view of themselves. They get "puffed up" about themselves because of what they seem to have accomplished or because of some status that they feel that they have attained.

But more often than not, according to this verse, their "accomplishments" are grounded in wickedness, selfishness, or violence. So God declares that these "puffed up" ones, who might outwardly seem to be highly "successful," are more often than not "puffed up" with a false view of themselves. When we have abandoned right living, we may look good in the world's eyes—but our high standing is nothing but a sham.

Comment 14

The implication of God's answer is that those who are "full of themselves" will soon run out of "hot air."

But what of those whose lives are filled with justice and compassion? What of those whose lives are marked by God's own ways?

The upright are filled with life, says God. They have life from above. They may not be perfect. At times, even the upright may have to confess their sins and plead for God's mercy. But they will be reckoned as "just" because of their faithfulness. They will be reckoned as "just" not because of any words that they have uttered but because of the life that they have lived. They will be reckoned as "just" because, through their way of living, they have humbly "kept faith" with the loving ways of a loving God.

Comment 15

As we will see, the dramatic contrast that God offers to Habakkuk will be critical to understanding the fullness of what is yet to come. But the insights that are conveyed through this verse have had an impact far beyond the world of Habakkuk.

In remarkable ways, Habakkuk was success-

ful in writing his vision on “tablets.” He conveyed the vision clearly and effectively. He made it plain for all to see, just as he was told.

Comment 16

We know that Habakkuk was successful because the perspective found in this verse became an integral part of Jewish theology. And because of their important role in Jewish theology, these words are likewise quoted in three New Testament epistles, each written by someone trained in the Jewish scriptures.

It’s also possible that this verse also lies behind one of Jesus’ parables.

Scripture to Read

Romans 1:16–18

Galatians 3:6–11

Hebrews 10:35–39

For Discussion

In what ways do each of these passages reflect or build on the message that was given to Habakkuk?

Scripture to Read

Luke 18:9–14

For Discussion

In what ways does this parable reflect or differ from the message that was given to Habakkuk?

Comment 17

The passages from Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews are filled with contrasts between the righteous and the unrighteous. They suggest that when it comes to our daily living, there are two kinds of people.

Those who follow the righteous way of living are those who “have done the will of God.”

On the other hand, those who follow the unrighteous way of living are those who “draw back” from the ways of God and instead follow ways that are based on a lie: the lie of hate, the lie of greed, the lie of “might makes right,” the lie that

we can achieve our own salvation.

Comment 18

The parable found in Luke reflects a similar understanding, but the parable takes it to a deeper level. It reminds us that those who follow the lie can be among the most religious of folks.

Those who follow the lie are often “puffed up” with their own religious behavior, proud and arrogant of their own accomplishments. They forget to rely on the faith that is a gift from above, a gift given to those who know and understand that they are in desperate need of God’s own mercy.

Comment 19

As a prophet who lived in the dying days of the nation of Judah, Habakkuk knew and understood how evil his own nation had been. It had not been upright. It had not walked with faithfulness to God’s ways. It had shed blood. It had played games with false powers. It had embodied greed and hate. It had been wicked indeed.

But what bothered Habakkuk—and what Habakkuk wrestled with God about—was the fact that God was allowing an even more wicked nation to take advantage of Judah. Babylon was coming closer and closer to Jerusalem. Soon the city itself would fall. Thousands would be marched off to a life of slavery and despair. The temple of the Lord would be smashed to pieces. Never again would life in Judah be the same.

Comment 20

God understands how wicked Babylon is. Back in chapter 1, God acknowledges that Babylon is a proud and arrogant nation with horses that are swifter than leopards and soldiers who are meaner than wolves. Babylon is like a vulture, swooping down on weaker neighbors, engaging in violence and mockery, snagging everyone it can in the nets of its power.

So in Habakkuk 2, verse 5, we have an acknowledgement from God of what Babylon is like. The one who is coming to afflict Judah is a nation that is “not upright.” As a nation, it is like

one who is “puffed up,” and thus, as a nation, it will not long survive.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:5–6a

Comment 21

In Habakkuk’s vision, God tells Habakkuk that Babylon is like a man who is drunk: stubborn, defiant, violent, and irrational.

Seven hundred years later, the book of Revelation would use a similar image. In talking about the mighty Roman empire, Revelation refers to it as “Babylon,” for Rome, like Babylon, was a nation that made other nations drink from the “wine of its wrath.”

Comment 22

Like the Roman empire, Babylon doesn’t stay at home. It goes marching around the world, “harvesting” other nations, gathering the world’s peoples into its “net.” It is proud, and its appetite is unstoppable. It opens its mouth as wide as death. Like death, there is no one that it does not seek to devour.

As a result, says God, “all people” will take up a “parable” against this monster. Through its actions, the nation of Babylon will provoke the judgment of all who have known its oppression, its violence, its evil ways.

Comment 23

In verses 6 through 19 of this chapter, we find Habakkuk being given an answer to his anguished questions about Judah—and an answer to his lingering doubts about God’s response to evil.

Superficially, the answer to Habakkuk comes in the form of five pronouncements of “woe” upon Babylon. In this sense, Babylon serves as a “stand-in” for all individuals and nations who choose the way of wickedness.

But as we will see, the significance of God’s answer goes far beyond these outward declarations of “woe.” And it is this deeper significance that provides the answer that Habakkuk truly

seeks.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:6–8

For Discussion

In these verses, what reasons are mentioned for a woe being pronounced upon Babylon?

In what kinds of situations do we see these same actions in the world today?

According to these verses, what form will the “woe” take?

Comment 24

To pronounce a “woe” upon someone was not meant as a curse or condemnation. A “woe” was a kind of deep mourning. It was like the mourning that one would do for the dead.

So to say “woe” to an evil nation or to an evil individual is to suggest that that nation or that individual is pursuing the ways of death. In fact, to express a “woe” to someone is to suggest that the person is about to fall from life.

Comment 25

In this sense, it’s understandable that God would declare “woe” unto those who are “puffed” up with their own pride, “puffed up” with their own violence, and “puffed up” with the blood of others, blood that they have so freely shed.

Those who behave with faithfulness to God’s ways will live, for they are numbered among the just. But those who have chosen the other path will not long survive. God mourns, for they have chosen the path of self-destruction. “Woe” is their only future.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:9–11

For Discussion

In these verses, what kinds of actions provoke the declaration of “woe”?

Comment 26

The first woe seems directed to those nations—and individuals—who take what is not theirs. They may *think* that they have a “right” to what they take, but their thinking has been snared by greed. And in order to get what they want, they must kill. Blood is shed, and lives are lost—lives that God created, lives that God fashioned.

The second woe seems directed to those who use their wrongful gains to build great houses. They have set their “nest on high.” They think that they have built for themselves a safe haven, a place where they can escape disaster and “be delivered from the power of evil.” But their “nest” is a nest of “shame,” says God.

Comment 27

Those who build “great houses” live like the high and mighty. They establish large households, filled with many wives, many children, many slaves, and many servants. Everything about them speaks of wealth.

But to establish their “great houses,” they have had to cut themselves off from their neighbors. They have built walls and gone to extraordinary lengths to keep the poor and the stranger out. They desperately try to insulate themselves from the cries of those whom they have wronged.

Comment 28

Scripture suggests that those who build “great houses,” those who have households and families that are rich and full, are not in touch with reality. They pretend that everyone is like themselves.

But the text of Habakkuk suggests that God’s world is fuller—and more interconnected—than these selfish ones think. Just when they think that they will hear the pleas of the hungry no more, the very stones with which they built their grand homes cry out. The beams and rafters join in chorus, declaring their guilt.

Woe, woe, says God, for their world is woe!

For Discussion

What do you think the text means when it says that stones and timbers cry out? In what sense do such objects “cry”?

In what ways is this also true today?

Comment 29

So far, we have looked only at the first two “woes” that God shares with Habakkuk as a way of responding to Habakkuk’s concern about the evil of the world. Although the full significance of these woes isn’t yet clear, some patterns are emerging.

For example, although the “woes” are addressed to Babylon, none of the “woes” speak of Babylon by name. As a result, each of the “woes” rises above the historical situation. Each of the “woes” begins to take on a universal application.

Comment 30

It is not just Babylon that will self-destruct. So will every individual, every community, and every nation that has blood on its hands.

It is not just Babylon that is headed to a time of woe. So is every individual, every community, and every nation that takes its neighbor’s goods and resources.

It is not just Babylon whose stones and timbers cry out against it. So do the stones and timbers of every individual, every community, and every nation that tries to build a “nest on high,” safe from all contact with suffering and pain.

Comment 31

There is also here in Habakkuk an emerging sense that individuals, communities, and nations must choose who—and what—they will serve.

When we combine this with the parable in Luke, we see that these choices must manifest themselves not just in pious language but in righteous and merciful deeds: a faithfulness that goes through and through.

Comment 32

There is an emerging sense as well that we as

individuals, communities, and nations can choose the way of “woe”—or the way of life. We can choose to “puff” ourselves up with our own glory, only to find ourselves toppling over in howling storms of our own creation.

Or we can choose to anchor ourselves in God’s unchanging hand, remembering that “the just shall live by faith.”

Comment 33

The time of truth is coming, says God. If it seems to tarry, just wait—for it *is* coming, and it’s coming fast. It will not delay, for time is filled with *swift* transitions, and its “season” has been set from above.

The choices that we face, whether as individuals or communities or nations, are well suggested in a song by Jennie Wilson:

*Time is filled with swift transition:
naught of earth unmoved can stand.
Build your hopes on things eternal:
hold to God’s unchanging hand.*

*Trust in him who will not leave you,
whatsoever years may bring.
If by earthly friends forsaken,
still more closely to him cling.*

*Covet not this world’s vain riches
that so rapidly decay.
Seek to gain the heav’nly treasures:
they will never pass away.*

*When your journey is completed,
if to God you have been true,
fair and bright the home in glory
your enraptured soul will view.*

*Hold to his hand, God’s unchanging hand.
Hold to his hand, God’s unchanging hand.
Build your hopes on things eternal:
hold to God’s unchanging hand!*

Habakkuk



SESSION 5: Habakkuk 2:12–20

Blessed quietness, holy quietness

Comment 1

Habakkuk lived about 2,600 years ago, in the dying days of the nation of Judah. He knew his nation had done evil. He knew it had not been upright. He knew it had not walked with faithfulness to God's ways. It had shed blood. It had played games with false powers. It had embodied greed and hate.

But what bothered Habakkuk—and what Habakkuk wrestled with God about—was the fact that God was allowing an even more wicked nation to take advantage of Judah.

Comment 2

Babylon was coming closer and closer to Jerusalem. Soon the city itself would fall. Thousands would be marched off to a life of slavery and despair. The temple of the Lord would be smashed to pieces. Never again would life in Judah be the same.

Habakkuk delivers many anguished questions to God. He doesn't understand how God could allow an even more wicked nation to triumph over Judah.

Comment 3

After posing his questions, Habakkuk goes up on a figurative "watchtower" to see what God's answer will be. As he stands on this figurative "watchtower," Habakkuk is told that the answers that are coming are not just for him. They are for all people.

So Habakkuk is told not just to hear God's response but also write in plain language on "tablets of stone." He is to write it so large and so clear that even someone who is merely running by can read it and understand it.

Comment 4

God goes on to explain to Habakkuk that the answer concerns a time that is yet coming. The fullness of what God is doing can't yet be seen, but Habakkuk is told to wait. He is told to tarry, for God won't be stopped.

Then God reminds Habakkuk that those who are puffed up with themselves are going nowhere. On the other hand, those who are "just" shall live. Those who are faithful to God's ways shall thrive.

Comment 6

In effect, the prophet Habakkuk discovers that there are two ways of living, two fundamental choices for individuals and communities and nations. There is the way of evil, the way of violence, the way of death. And there is the way of goodness, the way of peace, the way of life.

God reminds Habakkuk that the result of the choices made by individuals and communities and nations may not be apparent at first. But wait, says God. Tarry a while. Run on a little longer—and in time you'll see what the end will be.

Comment 7

As we saw last time, God doesn't answer

Habakkuk's questions by talking directly about Babylon. Rather, God speaks about all who are "drunk with the wine of the world." God speaks about all who abandon God and God's ways.

The answer that Habakkuk hears comes in the form of five pronouncements of "woe." On one level, the statements of "woe" are directed at Babylon, but Babylon itself is never named, for the declarations of "woe" are larger than Babylon. They apply to all who choose the way of wickedness over the way of goodness, the way of death over the way of life.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:5-6a

Comment 8

The vision that Habakkuk is given primarily concerns nations, though the same principles apply to individuals and communities.

The first woe concerns those who are conceited, arrogant, and treacherous. Nations in Habakkuk's day were like that. Nations today are like that. So are individuals and communities.

The first woe concerns those who continually open their mouths to "swallow" everyone around them. The first woe concerns those who are never satisfied with what they have and continually strive to round up other nations, putting others under their thumb so that they can get control over others' resources or achieve some kind of additional economic gain.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:6

Comment 9

In Habakkuk's vision, the victims of such efforts eventually rise up. The greedy and the arrogant may thrive for a time, but eventually "all people" turn on those who have behaved treacherously. "Woe" comes to those who have stepped on others to amass great wealth. "Woe" comes to those who have used violence to take over the resources of others for themselves.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:7

Comment 10

Habakkuk realizes that those who have been impoverished by the wicked greed of others will eventually rise up. They will awake and turn on their oppressors, and the oppressors will lose all that they think they have gained.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:8

Comment 11

Habakkuk realizes that there are nations who plunder other nations, using bloodshed and violence to get what they want. But he realizes as well that the day will come when such nations will themselves be plundered. The evil that they have done will come back to haunt them, for evil is ultimately its own worst enemy.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:9

Comment 12

In Habakkuk's vision, the second of the five "woes" concerns those who "set their nest on high." It concerns those who unjustly take what belongs to others to enlarge their own "house."

Habakkuk's primary concern is with nations who "set their nest on high." The "house" of which he speaks is not just a physical dwelling but a "household" of people, a whole nation living and working together through multiple generations.

In effect, then, the second woe concerns those nations who covet for their people a privileged place in the world, stealing from others so that they might enjoy the finest pleasures.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:10

Comment 13

Habakkuk realizes that in God's own time,

such nations will experience great sorrow and woe, for their “house” is a house of shame and their people—despite their privileged life style—are in reality a people of dishonor, for to build their “nest on high” they have sinned against their own soul.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:11

Comment 14

Nations that build a “nest on high” by crushing the hopes and dreams of others may think that they now live above the fray. They may think that the storms of life can’t reach them. They may think that they have everyone fooled.

But God assures Habakkuk that the “stones” with which such “houses” are built will eventually cry out against them. The “timbers” and “beams” that were used to construct a world of luxury for the privileged few will remain silent no longer. They will speak. The truth will be known. It will not lay hidden forever.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:12

Comment 15

In Habakkuk’s vision, the third “woe” is pronounced on those who build a town “with blood” and who establish a city through “iniquity.” It’s a woe on all whose “success” has come at others’ expense.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:13

Comment 16

Habakkuk realizes that those who build themselves up in this fashion do so by forcing others to labor for a pittance. They force others to be “weary” on their behalf. They have not done things the way that God would do things—and so their “house” is built in vain.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:15

Comment 17

In Habakkuk’s vision, the fourth “woe” is pronounced on those nations that “seduce” their neighbors. The “woe” is for those who entice their neighbors with “the wine of the world.” These new “drunkards” stagger to and fro. They think that by emulating the powerful they too can run down the road of glory. But it’s a trick. In the end, they are mocked and humiliated.

Scripture to Read

Esther 1:1–3,7,10–12

Comment 18

The fourth “woe” in Habakkuk uses an image drawn from those destructive orgies that have long been a favorite “game” of the high and mighty.

In the ancient world, one of the “privileges” of power was the lavish intermixing of drunkenness and sexual exploitation. These grand displays of drunkenness and gluttony usually ended in the shaming of others, usually women. In some situations, these demeaning sexual orgies seemingly went on for weeks or even months.

One example can be found in the book of Esther. King Ahasuerus demands that a beautiful woman dance provocatively for his drunken guests. When she refuses, the king becomes angry—and retaliates against her economically.

Scripture to Read

Daniel 5:1–3

Comment 19

In the book of Daniel, a mighty king named Belshazzar throws a drunken orgy for a thousand of his “good old boys.”

When the arrogant crowd is thoroughly drunk, the desire to humiliate someone grows in their hearts. In this case, the king decides to humiliate the Jews, whom his father Nebuchadnezzar had

carried into captivity. So Belshazzar orders his servants—some of whom may have themselves been Jews—to bring forth the gold and silver cups that had long ago been stolen from the temple in Jerusalem. By drinking from these once-sacred vessels, the king and his drunken buddies mock the Jewish people.

Scripture to Read

Mark 6:21–22,25,27

Comment 20

Here in the Gospel of Mark, a provincial ruler named Herod throws a birthday party for himself. He invites his pals—big land owners, military chiefs, and all those who enjoy dwelling in a “nest on high.” When everyone has had gotten thoroughly plastered, Herod brings on his daughter to dance naked for the crowd. After all, he wants them to have “a good time.”

But once again, the old pattern emerges. Before it's over, the severed head of John the Baptist is sitting on one of the party's platters.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:15–16

Comment 21

In Habakkuk's vision, “woe” is pronounced on those who seduce others into drunken orgies, orgies that inevitably end in mockery and humiliation. Habakkuk realizes that though the laughter at such affairs may endure for a time, those who down glasses of “glory” will ultimately find themselves vomiting buckets of “shame,” and those who delight in humiliating others will ultimately themselves be humiliated.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:17–19

Comment 22

In Habakkuk's vision, the fifth “woe” is directed to those who have done great violence to the natural world and then look to false gods for

justification or comfort.

In scripture, references to “Lebanon,” such as we find in verse 17, are often references more to the forests of the world than to a particular country. That's because in the Middle East, Lebanon was where the largest trees grew.

Comment 23

So when verse 17 refers to “the violence done to Lebanon,” it is talking about those nations that engage in destructive actions toward forests and other resources—the natural world that God has given.

There is also a reference in verse 17 to “the spoil of the beasts,” for arrogant nations often rape all aspects of the natural environment for their political and economic gain.

Comment 24

Nations that run roughshod over God's own world may *think* that they are thriving, but Habakkuk realizes that those who turn the “glory” of the earth into “shame” are simply ensuring their own future “woe.”

Often, these nations take the bits and pieces that remain from the natural world that they have destroyed, and then turn these bits and pieces into “gods” and “graven images.” But Habakkuk sees that such nations are thereby merely bowing to that which they have destroyed. Their gods will never answer, for the breath of life has been taken from them. All that remains is destruction.

Comment 25

The five “woes” that Habakkuk contemplates in the midst of his divine vision reflect the many ways in which individuals, communities, and nations get “puffed up” with themselves. Each “woe” addresses the behavior found in those who are “not upright,” the behavior of those who choose a path that is radically different from God's.

As we begin to think about these five “woes,” a pattern emerges. It becomes clear that those who go their own way—and those who do great evil—are seldom punished through God's direct

or immediate intervention. God doesn't step in and "zap" them.

Comment 26

Those who go their own way are not immediately struck down by lightning. Yet the future of evil doers is indeed "woe." It's sadness and sorrow. What lies ahead is always bleak, for in every case, those individuals, communities, and nations who choose to live in these ways are choosing by their own actions to ensure their own destruction.

The book of Habakkuk functions as a reminder that evil is its own worst reward. Woe to those who have chosen the way of death and destruction, we are told, for death and destruction is all that they have to cling to.

Scripture to Read

Matthew 26:51–52

Comment 27

When it comes to evil, the witness of scripture is remarkable. Scripture teaches that evil is so evil that it just keeps on destroying itself. Those who take up a sword *think* that they are going to "live" by that sword. They *think* that some good will be accomplished. But according to Jesus, it's an illusion, for those who try to "live" by the sword end up *dying* by the sword. Hate begets hate. Revenge begets revenge.

Scripture to Read

Romans 12:20–21

Comment 28

It's clear that the Paul who wrote Romans had long been a student of Jewish theology. He knew the scriptures inside and out. And perhaps it was his knowledge of the "woes" in Habakkuk, among other texts, that caused him to remind God's people that evil must be overcome with good, for when you use evil to overcome evil, all you have is evil—and in time, evil always self-destructs.

Scripture to Read

Matthew 6:14–15

Comment 29

A similar message can be found in Matthew, where Jesus tells his followers that just as evil leads to more evil, so forgiveness leads to more forgiveness.

Mark 4:24 puts it this way: the measure that we give is the measure that we get. If what we give is plunder, what we get is plunder. If what we give is mockery, we too will be mocked. If we are grabbing that which isn't ours, then we too will find our deepest treasures grabbed from us.

Comment 30

In the book of Habakkuk, it's as if God and Habakkuk are having a conversation. It's as if God is saying to Habakkuk, "As a nation, Judah did wicked things. It had great quantities of blood on its hands. Again and again, it chose the way of death rather than the way of life, the way of greed rather than the way of grace. And it shamed my creation rather than glorying in it."

Habakkuk nods his head. He knows that what God says is true.

Then God continues, saying, "Babylon is an even more wicked nation. Very soon it will come and destroy Judah. You wonder how I could let that happen. But don't you understand that Babylon, too, will self-destruct? Have you forgotten that all who walk by the sword, like Babylon is doing, will likewise perish by the sword? Have you forgotten that all who thrust the cup of drunkenness on their neighbor will end up drinking from that same cup?"

Comment 31

We humans tend to think that God, when given a choice, will surely prefer "the lesser of two evils." We think that God's wrath and judgment will surely be reserved for those who have done the "most" evil.

But the book of Habakkuk seems to suggest that evil is evil—and the path that we choose will

be its own reward.

Comment 32

It's not just Judah or Babylon that will self-destruct, says the book of Habakkuk. So will *every* individual or nation that chooses to have blood on its hands.

It's not just Judah or Babylon that is headed to a time of woe. So is *every* individual or nation that exploits its neighbor's goods and resources.

It's not just against Judah or Babylon that stones and timbers will cry out, for they continue to cry out against *every* individual and nation that tries to build a "nest on high."

It's not just Judah or Babylon that will find itself worshipping that which it has already destroyed. So will *every* individual or nation that turns God's created glory into a ugly mess of lifeless shame.

Comment 33

Habakkuk seems to suggest that we choose our future. As individuals, as communities, and as nations, we end up choosing our own fate.

We can choose the way of woe—or the way of life. We can choose to "puff" ourselves up with our own fast-fading glory—or we can anchor ourselves in God's unchanging hand, remembering that "the just shall live by faith."

Scripture to Read

Micah 4:1-4

Comment 34

Micah, another prophet of the Lord, reminds us that there is hope, even when individuals and nations have made the wrong choice.

We may have chosen the way of the sword—but we can still beat that sword into a plowshare, a practical instrument of hope and health, a tool with which to raise food to share with our neighbor.

We may have chosen the way of greed—but we can still set aside our selfish hearts and allow ourselves and our neighbors to sit under their

own vine and fig tree.

Comment 35

We may have chosen the way of terror, the way of drunken bragging and sexual exploitation—but we can still throw down our shameful ways and work for a world in which no one needs be afraid.

We may have chosen to stumble through the swamp of death and the mud of destructive behavior, tearing apart the glory of God's creation—but we can still knock the mud from our shoes and climb instead up God's holy mountain, living and affirming God's holy ways.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 2:20,14

Comment 36

According to Habakkuk, if the nations of the world want to roll their tanks and buzz their bombers and rattle their swords, that's their choice. If the world wants to shout glory to itself and rumble toward its own self-destruction, then so be it.

But Habakkuk reminds us that there is another way. There is another choice.

Comment 37

The unrighteous may be clamoring. Violence may be exploding around us. But the Lord remains in God's holy temple. It's not the temple in Jerusalem, for Habakkuk knows that that temple will soon be destroyed. Where God sits is in the boundary-less temple that we find mentioned in the book of Revelation—a temple whose glory knows no limits.

Habakkuk's prayer is that "all the earth" will "keep silence" before the Lord. Habakkuk's prayer is that individuals and nations and communities of every kind will cease their noisy jabber and halt their evil ways.

Comment 38

Stop the parades, Habakkuk seems to say.

Shut down the marching bands. Turn off the national anthems. Put gags on the propaganda machines. Beat every sword into a plowshare—and pull the plug on all who delight in blowing their own horn.

As God's people, as those who *know* that the just shall live by faith, we need to work not for more shouts of hallelujah, nice as those might be, for what must come first is a "blessed quietness."

Comment 39

What Habakkuk probably has in mind is that "holy quietness" that scripture portrays as a speechless awe that comes over individuals and nations when they are filled with the knowledge of God's glory.

It's that "blessed quietness" that floods our soul when we walk with deep assurance in God's holy ways, confident that in choosing forgiveness, we are granted forgiveness, confident that in practicing love, we receive love, confident that in choosing life, we experience life.

Comment 40

It's the "blessed quietness" of those who, instead of praising their own virtues, simply say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." It's the "holy quietness" of those who know that the works that they have done will speak for them.

Will such a day ever come? Is there any point in working for such a world? Verse 14 gives the answer: "The earth *shall* be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord."

So then, we don't work in vain. The day is coming. One day it *shall* be here, the day when all the world shall "hold to God's unchanging hand."

Habakkuk

The prophet who wrestled with God



SESSION 6: Habakkuk 3:1-6

Hallelujah, thine the glory— revive us again!

Comment 1

The prophet Habakkuk has honestly shared his deep questions for God: questions about why a more wicked nation can seemingly triumph over a less wicked nation.

The prophet knew that his own nation of Judah had done wrong. It had been evil and violent. Its leaders had been greedy and arrogant. But he wondered how God could sit back and watch the much larger and much more wicked nation of Babylon come in and destroy the nation of Judah, carrying many of the people into slavery and bondage in a foreign land. How could God let evil triumph like that?

Comment 2

But then the prophet Habakkuk shared God's answer, which came in a series of divine statements of "woe." In these divine statements of woe, evil is presented as self-destructive. Ultimately, it tears apart all those who follow in its ways. It's a circle that never ends, and before long, it turns on the very people and the very nations who it has tricked into practicing the ways of death and hate and greed.

The message that Habakkuk is given is that evil is its own reward. The very evil nation of Babylon may be about to destroy the smaller evil nation of Judah. But Babylon, too, will fall. Babylon, too,

will destroy itself. It will destroy itself through its own companionship with evil.

The just shall live by faith, says God. So choose the path of life, says God, not the path of death.

Comment 3

In a way, the message that Habakkuk is given in answer to his question is similar to a statement that we find in the book of Romans, a statement which declares that the wages of sin is death while the gift of God is eternal life. As Romans itself teaches, you can't overcome evil with evil, for the only thing that brings is more evil. Evil, says Romans, can only be overcome with good.

The section of Habakkuk's containing God's answer to the prophet concludes with a plea that is addressed to all the earth. It's a plea to all those individuals and nations who go racing after false gods, gods who will never hear and never answer.

Comment 4

The conclusion of God's answer to Habakkuk is a plea to all those individuals and nations who use the noisy, clanging tools of evil in a vain effort to defeat the evil that they see around them.

In effect, to all who shout until they are hoarse, thinking that they are finally on top of the world, God says, "Let all the earth keep silence. Let all the earth step back in awe and wonder, for the

Lord is in God's holy temple. It a temple that knows no bounds. It's a temple not made of stone but rather a 'temple' that encompasses the whole of God's universe." Keep silence, God seems to say, for in the face of such power, in the face of such holiness, who can speak?

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:1

Comment 6

We now look at the third and final chapter in Habakkuk.

Some translators say that the original Hebrew text of this chapter is in rather rough shape. Apparently the oldest, hand-written copies of this chapter have some missing words and hard-to-read phrases. That makes translation difficult.

Comment 7

Despite those problems, it's clear that this chapter begins with another prayer of Habakkuk. This time, the prayer is in response to the answer that God has provided.

Many scholars feel that this entire chapter may have been used at various times in Jewish worship, for it moves from Habakkuk's rather specific prayer to a general reflection on God's character and power. In that sense, it's like many of the poetic prayers found in the book of Psalms.

Comment 8

The first verse of chapter 3 includes the Hebrew word *shigionoth*. No one knows what this word fully means, but it's widely believed that it's a description of this chapter's poetic or musical format.

If this chapter were indeed chanted or sung as part of ancient Jewish worship services, then perhaps *shigionoth* is a guide to how it should be used in worship or perhaps it is a guide to its proper musical accompaniment.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:2

Comment 9

In chapter 1, Habakkuk raises questions and challenges for God. He struggles and wrestles with what he sees around him. Then in chapter 2, Habakkuk goes up onto a figurative "watchtower" to look and see how God will respond.

As Habakkuk stands on the "watchtower," God graciously responds. Through God's response, Habakkuk becomes aware of the self-destructive cycle of evil. The importance of our choice between the ways of life and the ways of death becomes clear to him.

Comment 10

Now here in chapter 3, Habakkuk turns back God and says, in effect, "You have spoken, and I have heard. Not only have I heard, but I have learned."

"Like the earth that keeps silence before you," says Habakkuk, "I tremble. I tremble not because I am afraid in some faithless sense but rather because, like the women who discover the empty tomb in the Gospel of Mark, I have been brought face to face with your holy power. I tremble in awe, for you are holy indeed!"

Scripture to Read

Jonah 3:10-4:3
Habakkuk 3:2b

For Discussion

In what ways are the prayers of Habakkuk and Jonah either similar to or different from one another?

What can we learn from Habakkuk's words to God, "In wrath, remember mercy"?

In Habakkuk, what do you think the prophet is asking God to revive?

Comment 11

The opening verses of chapter 3 suggest that Habakkuk has come to realize that the ways of evil are evil—and the ways of life are life. When the world is faithful to God's ways, there is love and peace and joy. And when the world opens it-

self to God's holiness, hope erupts.

So the prophet turns to God and says, in effect, "O Lord, I have heard your voice. I have seen your love. And I am awed by all you do."

Comment 12

In effect, the prophet then confesses, "My nation has joined in the ways of evil. My people has gone the way of hate and violence and greed. So have our neighbors."

But Habakkuk doesn't leave it there. He turns to God and says, "But now we're tired of death. We're tired of oppression. We're tired of injustice. We're tired of war. So please, O Lord, won't you revive us again? Won't you renew your holy ways in and through us? Won't you lead us again—not someday but *now*, right in the midst of these difficult years?"

"We know that you're angry with us," the prophet confesses, "for you have seen us go astray. But please, we pray, in the midst of your wrath, remember mercy! Let your compassion, which is like the compassion of a mother for her child, renew our hearts. Please, O Lord, revive our hopes!"

For Discussion

To what extent do prayers like this get prayed in public worship today? Why or why not?

Scripture to Read

Psalm 85:3,6–13

Comment 13

The spirit of Habakkuk's prayer is not unique to the book of Habakkuk. It can be found elsewhere in scripture as well.

Psalm 85, for example, acknowledges God's wrath and the "folly" of God's people who have so often walked in evil ways. Yet even in the midst of his confession, the psalmist pleads, "Show us thy mercy, O Lord, and grant us thy salvation."

Comment 14

In place of wrath, says the psalmist, let "mercy

and truth" meet together. Let "righteousness and peace" kiss. Let goodness spring from the earth—and a holy love rain down from the heavens.

"Revive us again," says the psalmist, using words much like those of Habakkuk. And then, in the last verse of the psalm, we learn what that revival will mean: we will follow in God's steps; we'll practice God's ways; no longer will we walk in the foolish and self-destructive ways of violence and evil.

An hymn by William Mackay reflects a similar prayer:

*Revive us again—fill each heart with thy love;
may each soul be rekindled with fire from above.
Hallelujah, thine the glory! Hallelujah, amen!
Hallelujah, thine the glory—revive us again!*

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:3a

Comment 15

After praying for God's mercy to be made manifest—and after praying that God's holy ways would be revived among God's people even in the course of his own lifetime—Habakkuk now begins recalling some of the great examples of God's mercy and power.

He calls these great events to mind. In fact, he envisions them so strongly and so vividly that he writes about them almost as if he were there watching them happen.

Comment 16

In envisioning God's liberating power and grace, Habakkuk recalls God coming from two places of which most of us have never heard: Teman and Mount Paran. Teman is in the ancient land of Edom, near the Sinai Peninsula, in one of the regions through which God's people are said to have passed as they left Egypt. Mount Paran is near Mount Sinai, where Moses the leader of God's people was said to have met God.

So Habakkuk writes that "God came from Teman" and "the Holy One from Mount Paran."

But Habakkuk isn't intending these words to serve as a *literal* description of where God dwells.

Comment 17

Rather, Habakkuk mentions Teman and Mount Paran as key place names in the long journey of God's people from slavery to freedom. Habakkuk's references to Teman and Mount Paran serve as a powerful reminder that when a great mass of people were fleeing from slavery and oppression, God was there with them, mercifully attending to their needs, both physically and spiritually.

The Exodus story was greatly treasured in the Jewish community. It was the leading example of God's power and grace, the leading reminder that history is not ultimately in the hands of those who practice evil and hate.

Comment 18

No one knows exactly what happened in that remarkable journey that we call "the Exodus." The biblical accounts were likely written long after the events, and some of the descriptions may be more theological than historical in character.

But it's clear from what we have been given that the Exodus was a deeply transforming experience, which is why the memories of it were handed down so faithfully from generation to generation.

Comment 19

So when Habakkuk envisions how God came to walk with an oppressed people as they crossed from Egypt to Canaan, he is evoking an awesome image. It's so awesome that soon after evoking it, he interrupts himself with the Hebrew word *selah*.

The exact meaning of *selah* has long since been lost, but it probably had something to do with a musical emphasis. Perhaps *selah* is where trumpets would sound as a psalm or prayer was sung. Perhaps *selah* is where a musical note would be held and drawn out or even turned around in dramatic fashion. Perhaps *selah* is where dancers

would erupt in joy as a way of deepening the worship experience.

Comment 20

Habakkuk's mention of Teman and Mount Paran are a vivid reminder that the same God who came before can come again. The same God who overcame evil with good in the days of the Exodus can do so again.

Even when hope seems gone and even when our "follies" are many, the same God who steadied the feet of a wandering people can come into whatever wilderness we wander—and revive us again.

The message found in this portion of Habakkuk is thus a bit like those gospel songs that urge us to "hold on" just a little while longer—for the God of love and mercy is still at work.

For Discussion

In what kinds of "wildernesses" do we find ourselves today? In what ways does God walk with us through these "wildernesses"?

Habakkuk seems to find strength in vividly picturing God's actions in the past. In what ways can we do the same?

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:3b

Comment 21

Habakkuk's deep vision is rooted in the past, but it connects with the present and extends into the future. He envisions a time in which God's glory covers the heavens and God's praise fills the earth.

It's a vision of a world transformed, a world much like John envisioned in the book of Revelation when he saw a new heaven and a new earth, a world in which all tears were wiped away, for there was no more war, no more violence, no more death, no more hate, no more injustice—no more endless cycle of evil.

Scripture to Read

Numbers 14:19–21

Comment 22

In one sense, Habakkuk's vision is perhaps grounded in a story found in the book of Numbers, where the people who are slowly wandering toward freedom fall back into evil ways. God is angry, but Moses goes to God and pleads for God's mercy once again.

In the story as it is told in Numbers, God pardons. But God also tells Moses that even as God lives, the day is coming in which there will be no more need of pardon, for a day is coming when all will walk in God's holy ways—and in that day, “the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord.”

Scripture to Read

Psalms 72:18–19

Comment 23

In like manner, Psalm 72 implies that it is in joining with God in doing wondrous deeds—in caring for the poor and the needy and in redeeming our neighbors from deceit and violence—that we truly bless God's name.

In his concluding prayer and poem, Habakkuk envisions a world in which God's glory covers the heavens and the earth is filled with God's praise. How will that happen? It will happen when we allow God to revive us again so that our every deed can truly demonstrate not the ways of death but the ways of life.

Scripture to Read

Revelation 21:2–3, 22–25

Habakkuk 3:4

Comment 24

Habakkuk describes God's glory as being similar to a brilliant light, a light that is brighter than any sun, brighter than any moon.

The King James Version conveys the literal sense of the Hebrew text when it says that “horns”

come from God's hand, but the meaning is closer to what we in today's world would call “rays.”

Comment 25

In other words, there is so much glory in God's hands—so much holy power—that it is like looking directly at a thousand suns on a day without clouds. The “rays” or “horns” of light that shine forth are blinding in their brilliance.

Revelation uses similar imagery in describing “the holy city,” a world in which God's people live as God's people ought. We're told in Revelation that there is no more need for sun or moon—for God's glory radiates with dazzling brilliance.

For Discussion

The last portion of Habakkuk 3:4 suggests that God's power is “hidden” in the brilliant light coming from God's hands. What do you think Habakkuk might mean by this? How can God's glory be like a brilliant light that illumines every corner of the world, yet God's power be somehow “hidden”?

Can you think of any situations in which you or others have simultaneously experienced both the glory of God and the “hiddenness” of God's power?

Comment 26

It seems impossible to reconstruct what the prophet originally meant by his image. He described God's glory as a brilliant light that covers the sky and fills the earth, yet he suggested that God's power is somehow “hidden” by the dazzling rays of light that come from God's hands.

Perhaps one way of looking at this image is to consider the biblical teaching that says that it is the faithful actions of God's people, walking in God's ways, who constitute God's glory. When we “let our little light shine,” it is not *our* light at all. It is God's light shining through us. It is God's glory beginning to fill the earth, God's glory beginning to cover the sky.

Comment 27

We know that there is power in God's hands, a mighty, earth-transforming power. Yet sometimes that power *is* hidden from us, for we falsely imagine that God's power and glory has nothing to do with us and the ways in which we are living.

Sometimes we forget that when we are faithful, we are God's hands. Sometimes we forget that when we plant seeds of love and hope and peace, when we lift up the broken-hearted and heal those who have been wounded, when we free those who are captives and unchain those who are oppressed, we become a part of God's glory.

Comment 28

Sometimes we forget that we ourselves are to be a portion of that light that fills "the holy city." Sometimes we forget that those dazzling rays that come with such power from the hand of God, they are *us*.

And when we forget such things, it's fair to say that the truth is "hidden" from our eyes. When we forget such things—and begin to imagine that how we live from day to day doesn't matter—God's glory becomes obscured.

When that happens, perhaps we need to join Habakkuk and so many others in singing...

*Revive us again—fill each heart with thy love;
may each soul be rekindled with fire from above.
Hallelujah, thine the glory! Hallelujah, amen!
Hallelujah, thine the glory—revive us again!*

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:3–6

For Discussion

What do you think verse 6 means when it describes God's glory as causing mountains to be scattered and hills to be bowed low and even nations to be driven asunder?

How can we apply the message of this text to our own burdens and problems and illnesses?

Comment 29

Habakkuk wrestled with God over the evil that he saw in the nations around him. Those nations seemed to thrive. They seemed as tough as the mountains and as enduring as the hills.

But God opened Habakkuk's eyes. God allowed Habakkuk to see and feel that when God's glory goes forth—when God's people, who are hidden in God's hands, rise up with mercy and love and peace—great mountains will move. Whole hills will bow low. And even the mightiest of nations will be torn asunder.

Comment 30

Habakkuk struggled at first. But he's come to understand that one can never overcome evil with evil. Judah had already tried that—and it hadn't worked. Nation after nation has tried that—and it never works

Yet as we move through this third and final chapter of Habakkuk, we sense that the prophet has taken hold of a hope that endures, for he's come to see that when we embody the goodness and power of God, we truly can say, "Move, mountain!" and the mountains in our world and the mountains in our lives *will* move, for as it says in the Gospel of Matthew, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they *shall* be filled."

Habakkuk

The prophet who wrestled with God



SESSION 7: *Habakkuk 3:7–19*

Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble!

Comment 1

The prophet Habakkuk had seen his nation depart from God's ways. Again and again, it had done great evil. Its worship of God had been a mockery, for Judah as a nation had been greedy and arrogant. It had both threatened violence and engaged in violence. It thought it could get away with anything.

But now horrible things were happening to Judah. The country was being overrun by invaders and raiders. It would soon fall to the hand of the even more evil nation of Babylon. God's temple would be destroyed. God's people would be taken captive.

Comment 2

At first, Habakkuk wrestles with God over all of this. How can God let the very evil and oppressive nation of Babylon have such success? And how can God allow a big evil nation to overcome a small evil nation like Judah? Doesn't God care about what is happening?

In the course of his conversations with God, Habakkuk comes to understand that evil can only be overcome with good. By itself, evil destroys. It destroys those on whom it is unleashed. And it also destroys those who do the unleashing. When we choose the way of evil, we choose our own undoing.

Comment 3

Habakkuk begins to see that selfish greed might seem to gain you great pleasures for a while—but then it turns and destroys you. Violence and military aggression might seem to gain you safety for a while—but then they turn and tear you apart. For a time, arrogance at the expense of others might gain you a degree of prideful superiority over your neighbors—but then it turns and throws you down with a vengeance.

With all this in mind, Habakkuk climbs a figurative "watchtower." He hopes to see what God is up to. From that watchtower, he sees that the triumph of Babylon will be short-lived, for the cycle of evil is always grounded in a cycle of self-destruction. It is only the ways of God that bring life and hope and love.

Comment 4

Recognizing at last the full scope of what was happening, Habakkuk returns to God and begins to ask God to "revive us again." He confesses and acknowledges his nation's sin. Then he pleads for holy renewal—not just for himself but for his nation.

Turning to God, Habakkuk prays, "In wrath, O Lord, remember mercy!" Lord, he cries, we as a nation have angered you greatly. There's no excuse for our sinful behavior, but please, O Lord,

in your wrath, remember mercy!

Comment 6

Finally, as we saw last time, Habakkuk has a vision in which he senses the extent of God's glory and power.

We may think that there is might in chariots and weapons. We may think that great bombers and aircraft carriers are what rule the world. We may think that great wealth will buy us power. But in his vision, Habakkuk realizes that power such as this is as nothing before the face of God.

In Habakkuk's vision, it's as if a blazing light is coming from God's hand. It's so dazzling that we aren't even able to see its fullness. God moves, and the mountains rattle. God moves, and nations fall apart. God moves, and even the hills bow low before the power of their Creator.

Comment 7

Habakkuk's vision is a reminder that we as individuals and communities and nations can walk in the ways of the Destroyer—or we can walk in the ways of the Creator. The Destroyer brings death. The Creator brings life.

To those who buy into the mind-set of evil, the ways of God may seem weak. But those who walk in love can say to the mountains, "Move, mountain," and the mountains, recognizing the ways of their Creator, will scatter.

Habakkuk's vision is a reminder that when we let God's light shine through us, the power of evil is truly broken.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:7

Comment 8

Habakkuk's vision continues. He mentions two nations from his part of the world, nations that once seemed powerful and strong. One nation he calls "Cushan" and the other "Midian."

In Habakkuk's vision, God's glory has already come forth. The mountains have moved. And so in his vision, Habakkuk sees these great nations

of Cushan and Midian in shambles.

Comment 9

Outwardly, Cushan might seem strong. But it is in affliction. Outwardly, Midian might seem like it will last forever. But it is trembling.

These nations that were once so "puffed up" with themselves, these nations that once took pride in their own power and glory, are now seen for what they truly are: nothing but trembling leaves over an open fire. They are headed toward self-destruction.

For Discussion

What do you think the effect of this vision was on Habakkuk—and why?

If God were to allow us to see the world as Habakkuk saw it, how would it affect our attitudes and our actions—and why?

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:8

Comment 10

Scholars have had a hard time translating this verse because the ancient words which are used here are obscure and unusual.

Most translations agree, however, that this verse is a kind of question for God from Habakkuk. But no longer is Habakkuk's question the kind of question that arises from bafflement and doubt. Rather, this question arises from Habakkuk's own growing understanding of what God has revealed.

Comment 11

In the King James Version, Habakkuk asks here if God was displeased against "the rivers" and "the sea." In the King James Version, it's as if Habakkuk wants to know if a displeasure with the rivers and the sea is why God has moved in the world with such power.

But other translations, perhaps working with a better understanding of the ancient text, think that Habakkuk is not asking about "the rivers" or

“the sea” at all. After all, it was not “the rivers” that were engaging in such evil.

Comment 12

Some of these newer translations think that the ancient words used in the text are really the names of false gods. These newer translations assume that in this verse, Habakkuk is making mention of those false deities and perverted religious ideas that cause nations and individuals to walk in the ways of evil—and even to imagine that those evil ways are somehow “blessed.”

“That’s what your anger blazes against, isn’t it?” Habakkuk asks. With a growing sense of understanding, Habakkuk seems to ask, “It’s not people who you despise—or even groups of people—is it? For how could you despise that which you have created? Rather, your wrath is directed against that pervasive spirit that gives rise to our evil behavior, isn’t it?”

“O Lord, you see to the heart of the matter, don’t you?” asks Habakkuk. “You see all the way down to those false gods and those destructive ideologies that so easily take root in our souls, don’t you?”

For Discussion

What should we learn for ourselves from Habakkuk’s understanding of what it is that causes God’s displeasure?

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:8

Comment 13

The latter part of this image is very figurative, but it reflects a deep understanding on Habakkuk’s part of God’s glory and power.

Habakkuk seems to suggest that when nations go astray—when they chase after false beliefs and destructive ways, when they practice slavery and oppression, when they engage in dominance and war, when they puff themselves up and think of themselves as great—God hitches up a team of holy “horses” and begins riding through the

world on “chariots of salvation.”

Perhaps Habakkuk is suggesting that the ways of evil may run on and on, but no matter how hard our days may be and no matter how dangerous the world becomes, there is still a Creator on the move. “Swing low, sweet chariot,” he seems to plead. “Swing low, so that we might once again follow in your holy ways!”

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:9a

Comment 14

Once again, Habakkuk uses a figurative image. He imagines God with a bow and arrow. In the language of the King James Version, the bow is “quite naked.” It’s as if God’s bow is in God’s hands, right out front for people to see. The bow has been taken out of its carrying case. It’s ready for action. It’s ready for use.

Comment 15

The rest of this verse, however, like a number of others in this chapter, has been quite difficult for translators, for once again, the Hebrew words are obscure.

After the reference to the bow being “quite naked,” the King James Version talks about “the oaths of the tribes, even thy word”—which doesn’t seem to follow from what has gone before.

Some newer translations make more sense, for in place of the “tribes” found in the King James Version, they speak of “rods” or “arrows”—objects to be used with a bow. The effect of these newer translations is to suggest that not only has God’s bow been taken out of its carrying case but God’s “arrows” are ready.

Comment 16

If these newer understandings are correct, then Habakkuk is saying that these “arrows” are sworn by oath to uphold God’s ways and God’s truth and God’s love. These arrows, however, are not literal weapons of destruction, for Habakkuk goes on to equate them with “thy word.”

In other words, these “arrows” are the piercing words of God, the “two-edged sword” that cuts through our illusions, breaks the bondage of evil, and uncovers the power of God’s grace. And so, immediately after reading this amazing declaration, we find the Hebrew word “Selah,” which is normally understood as a musical instruction that suggests an interlude for special emphasis or celebration.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:9b–10

For Discussion

What kind of images is Habakkuk offering here? What do you think their significance is in this context?

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:11–12

Comment 17

Nations rule their bits of territory. Like Babylon, some even try to bully and overrun their neighbors. But Habakkuk reminds us that there is a God before whom even the biggest and strongest of nations appears to be no more important than a flea or a mosquito.

Habakkuk knows that there is a Power that makes every nation and even the very spirit of evil seem insignificant. It is the holy Creator, the One who splits the earth with rivers, the One who causes mountains to rumble, the One who orders rain to fall, the One who stirs the deepest center of the earth and who causes thunder to roll.

Comment 18

Habakkuk reminds us that this Creator is greater than any evil that the world can know. When waves crash and winds blow and lightning crackles through the sky, it is perhaps good to remind ourselves that “God is at work.”

Of course, it is not just when lightning flashes that God is at work, for God is not just in the thunder and God is not just in the lightning.

Comment 19

The thunder and the lightning—and even the mighty lava that rolls down from great volcanos—these are only reminders, holy reminders that our God is at work.

They are reminders that even when God seems absent, even when the clamor of human greed seems to have drowned out the voice of the Holy One, even when evils beyond our imagining seem to be getting their way, there is a Power that endures. It’s a Power greater than any evil we may face—and that Power will still be standing strong long after those who have arrogantly “puffed” themselves up have sunk into an empty oblivion.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:12

Comment 20

In Habakkuk 3:12, the King James Version declares that “thou didst thresh the heathen in anger.” But the word that is translated as “heathen” is more accurately understood as “the nations,” for there is something about the arrogance and small-time power of *all* the world’s puffed-up nations that indeed causes them to act like “heathen,” like those who ignore God and God’s ways.

Against such, says Habakkuk, God’s fury rages. Against such, the bow and arrow of God’s word is made ready. Against such, the power of good is set loose.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:11

Comment 21

Habakkuk’s vision also includes a reference to the sun and moon standing still “in their habitation.”

People of Habakkuk’s day had a different understanding of astronomy than we do. They imagined that the sun and moon had some kind of “house” where they stayed when they weren’t in the sky.

So when Habakkuk says that the sun and the moon “stayed in their habitation,” he means that in his vision, as the Creator moved with power through the universe, darkness fell over the earth, for the sun and the moon both had “gone home.”

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:11

Mark 15:29–33

Comment 22

Some scholars feel that the author of Mark had Habakkuk 3:11 in mind when he made a point of describing the great darkness that fell over Jerusalem as the Roman army put Jesus to death.

Yes, at that moment, evil appeared strong. Yes, “the nations,” as Habakkuk might have put it, seemed to be getting their way.

Comment 23

But the truth, Mark suggests, is that the all-powerful Creator was merely getting ready to shake loose a tomb—and thereby start the mountains quaking.

In Mark’s Gospel, darkness falls on the earth. At “the sixth hour,” which is almost right in the middle of the day, the sun and the moon simply decide to stay “in their habitation.” For a time, they each “go home” and stay there.

Mark wants his readers to know that even in that awful hour, the Power above all powers was at work. As Habakkuk himself said back in chapter 2, there are times when all the earth needs to keep silence before God. There are times when even the sun and the moon need to stop shining before that One in whose dazzling light even the greatest of “the nations” is nothing.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:11–13a

Comment 24

Habakkuk elaborates on his vision. He explains that when the sun and the moon go

home—and when the light of God’s word and God’s way is shot like an arrow across the face of the earth, when the mountains rumble and roll, and when God’s chariot swings low and God’s power marches forth—it is “for the salvation of thy people, even for the salvation of thine anointed.”

In Habakkuk’s day, this vision was a promise. Although Babylon was strong and although Babylon would force many captives into slavery and bondage in a strange land, those captives would return. Babylon would not last. Salvation was on the horizon. The tomb would be opened. The earth would groan. Hope would be renewed.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:13

Mark 3:22–27

Comment 25

According to Habakkuk, the way of the world—the way of the nations, the way of the “heathen”—is to try to overcome evil with evil. The way of the world is to fight Satan with Satan, but that leaves you with nothing but Satan and the always self-destructive spirit of evil.

So Habakkuk envisions something better, something more enduring. He envisions the power of good, the power of the Creator, the power of life. In the words of the King James Version, it is a power that “woundest the head out of the house of the wicked.” Or, as a contemporary Jewish translation puts it, it is a power that is able to “smash the roof of the villain’s house.”

Comment 26

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus uses similar language, language that may well have been inspired by Jesus’ own deep understanding of this very passage from Habakkuk. After reminding his followers that evil can’t be overcome with evil and Satan can’t cast out Satan, Jesus declares that the only way to spoil “the strong man’s house”—the only way to “smash the roof of the villain’s house”—is to “bind” the strong man.

In other words, only by turning off the ways of evil and by practicing instead the peaceful and loving ways of God can we ever hope to turn this world around, for as Jesus has shown us, it is not by violence but by love that the world is transformed.

For Discussion

What evidence of this, if any, can we point to in today's world?

Comment 27

Habakkuk wrestled with God not because he was a shallow person but because he was a deep person. The depth of the great images and visions that we find throughout his book reveal the richness of his own spiritual journey.

Habakkuk has offered us a deep understanding of the life-giving power of the Creator—and the relevance of that power in the realm of history, even in the realm of “the nations.” But he is about to expand our understanding with a reference to the most treasured memory of the Jewish people: the exodus from Egypt, the deliverance from slavery, the liberation from oppression.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:13–15

Comment 28

Habakkuk recalls another time that the Creator God moved through history for the salvation of God's anointed ones, another time when the house of the wicked was smashed low. He doesn't mention Egypt directly, for it was not Egypt itself that was bad but the spirit of evil that worked in its heart.

It was a time, says Habakkuk, when the spirit of evil was rejoicing, for certain people were devouring “the poor.” Not only were they devouring the poor, says Habakkuk, but they were doing so “secretly” (verse 14).

Comment 29

The oppressors of the poor were sneaky and

underhanded. They probably thought that they were getting away with what they were doing. But as it turns out, God knew. Before long, God's “arrows” shattered their illusions. The light that blazed from God's hands showed the truth.

As described in the book of Exodus, these evil doers tried to get God off their backs by telling the oppressed ones that they could go free, but as soon as they started to leave, the oppressors chased after them and tried to attach the old chains, not realizing that the Holy One was watching.

Comment 30

According to the story as it appears in Exodus, Pharaoh's army was in hot pursuit. The oppressed ones who were seeking to escape to freedom had nowhere to go, nowhere to turn. So they plunged into the sea.

In verse 15, Habakkuk recalls how God then raced through the sea with holy horses, holding back the tide, gathering the sea into a great “heap” so that the poor could move toward freedom.

It's a vivid story for Habakkuk because for thousands of years, the story has been retold during the season of Passover. Each year at Passover, those who celebrate the feast are told to imagine that each of them had been personally led to freedom by God's almighty arm, that each of them had personally experienced God's saving power.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:16

Comment 31

Some scholars think that in this verse, Habakkuk is “trembling” because he has heard that the Babylonian army is fast approaching. They think that he has heard that the “day of trouble” is soon upon him and his people. These scholars feel that the “tremble” that is described in this verse is the tremble of fear.

Other scholars disagree. They think that in this verse, Habakkuk is indeed acknowledging that “the day of trouble” is near but that he is trembling not out of fear but out of an awareness

of God's overwhelming power.

Comment 32

These scholars point out that Habakkuk has just reminded us of how God liberated an oppressed people from Egypt. Like Jews down through the centuries, Habakkuk has been taught to imagine himself in the midst of the story, feeling the impact of God's glory, watching in awe as God binds "the strong man," smashing the roof of the villain's house as only God and God's ways can do.

An old spiritual conveys the strength that is imparted to those who are willing to imagine themselves as truly being present when God's power is made clear, even in the most dreadful of times:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?

Were you there when they pierced him in the side?

Were you there when the sun refused to shine?

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble!

Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?

Comment 33

If this second group of scholars is right, then maybe Habakkuk trembles because deep within him is a recognition that the power of salvation is at work even when nails are being hammered into a cross, even when the world is erupting with war, even when lives are being destroyed and demolished.

Maybe his bowels, as it were, let loose and his self-control crumbles because in some kind of deep, spiritual sense, he "was there" during the exodus when God's enduring strength rose up in triumph over the house of the "strong man."

If so, then perhaps a contemporary song by Lillian Bouknight expresses the fearless faith that

Habakkuk feels:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation,
the Lord is my light and my salvation,
the Lord is my light and my salvation—
whom shall I fear?*

*In the time of trouble, he shall hide me,
in the time of trouble, he shall hide me,
in the time of trouble, he shall hide me—
whom shall I fear?*

Comment 34

The Gospel of Mark is full of symbolic actions by Jesus, each designed to convey an important truth.

In Mark 11, Jesus and his disciples are approaching Jerusalem, where he will be arrested and killed. On his way into the city, Jesus makes a point of stopping near a fig tree. He walks up to it and checks to see if it has any fruit. It doesn't, and Jesus declares that it will never have any fruit again.

Later in the same chapter, just after watching the exploitation of the poor in the Jerusalem temple, Peter asks Jesus what the incident with the fig tree was all about. Jesus' reply is simple and direct: "Have faith in God."

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:17-18

Comment 35

Because Jesus was well-grounded in the Jewish scriptures, it's possible that his dramatic encounter with the fig tree, as described in Mark 11, was a way of consciously calling his disciples' attention to these concluding verses of Habakkuk, where there is likewise a reference to a fig tree that bears no fruit.

Perhaps Jesus wanted his disciples to see that even when life is bleak, even when disaster is around the corner, even when the fig tree bears no fruit and the fields yield no grain, even when your hopes have been dashed and the ways of evil seem strong, the God of salvation, the Lord

of history and the Creator of the universe—that God is *still* at work.

Scripture to Read

Habakkuk 3:19

Comment 37

Habakkuk concludes with an amazing declaration. The prophet says that even though Jerusalem is about to be destroyed and even though the Babylonian army is about to pounce, “the Lord God is my strength.”

Like Jesus, who was cruelly killed and then thrown in a tomb, Habakkuk knows a cruel fate may await him. But like Jesus, Habakkuk is convinced that he can “have faith in God.” He is convinced that even though he is knocked low, there is a God of supreme power who will make his feet like “hinds’ feet,” which is to say, like the feet of a deer.

Comment 38

As he approached Jerusalem—and as he approached the cruel grip of those who wanted to

do away with him, Jesus had the confidence of Habakkuk, the prophet who had wrestled with God.

The day was fast approaching when Jesus’ lifeless body would be thrown into a tomb. But the body that had been killed was soon given the feet of a deer. And according to the Gospels, this same Jesus was able to leap high, and in the end, it was the feet of Jesus—and not the feet of those Roman soldiers—that could be seen strolling in high places.

Comment 38

The book of Habakkuk includes a stark acknowledgement of the sorrow and pain that evil can bring, as well as a fervent confidence in the God who can bring us through.

In light of this message, it is perhaps not surprising that the book ends with instructions to a singer who is playing on a stringed instrument, for this book, which began with anguished questions, is also a book suited for joyous singing. It’s a book that even in the harshest of times can cause us to “*tremble, tremble.*”