

**Text:** Habakkuk 1:1-11

**Title:** Prophet's Lament and God's Reply

**Truth:** God will execute justice, at His time and in His way.

**Date/Location:** Wednesday May 13 and 17, 2020 at FBC (via Zoom/livestream)

## **Introduction, v. 1 (May 13, 2020)**

Almost nothing is known of the prophet Habakkuk. His name only occurs twice in the Scriptures: at 1:1 and 3:1 in the book with his name. His prophecy has long held its place in the Hebrew Bible despite this relative anonymity. His obscurity allows us to move quickly into the prophecy or oracle that he saw.

The KJV and NKJV commonly call such prophecies “burdens,” which is particularly fitting when they contain “heavy” material such as judgment and devastation, which this one does.

The book of Habakkuk was probably written sometime between 609 and 598 B.C. during the reign of Jehoiakim. A tighter time frame of 609 to 605 B.C. is likely. This date best explains the identity of the wicked people in 1:2-4 (Jews in Judah), the super-power status of Babylon (which had to come after Nabopolassar in 625 B.C.), and the fact that Josiah (reign 640-609 B.C.) was exempted from seeing the invasion of Babylon (2 Kings 22:20—after the re-discovery of the book of the Law). Verse 1:5 indicates that the fulfillment of the judgment on Judah will be within the prophet's lifetime (“in your days”).

Remember that the northern 10 tribes were destroyed in 722 B.C., over 100 years earlier. They are not an issue in this prophecy.

## **I. Habakkuk's Request, v. 2-4**

A. Overall in verses 2-4, the prophet complained that they were experiencing awful conditions in the southern kingdom. This could be explained by the fact that Josiah was a good king, but had recently died in 609 B.C. at the hands of Pharaoh Necho (2 Kings 23:29). Recall that he was the boy-king who did right in the sight of God like David (2 Kings 22:1-2). Jehoahaz reigned for the next 3 months, but he was evil. Then Eliakim (Jehoiakim), another son of Josiah, was put on the throne by Pharaoh. He also was evil (2 Kings 23:37). Neither brother apparently learned the ways of their father.

So, all the good of the prior 31 years was erased and the new king(s) had brought back the awful conditions of prior wicked kings.

B. Verse 2: The prophet wondered how long his complaint would have to go on before the Lord would “hear” and “save.” This is a classic lamentation of a righteous person. He cannot bear to see the wickedness of the people, but at the same time there is nothing that he can do about it except cry out to God. We see it in Job, and many times in the Psalms (13:1-2 is a good example). Isaiah asked “how long” he would have to prophesy doom to the nation. Then when he cries out to God, and God does not answer very soon, it seems that not even God cares. Thus the cry, “How long?!” The righteous may feel abandoned by God. This is all the more true in ancient Israel because God’s law specified national curses for disobedience. When would they fall upon the wicked in order to get the nation back to sanity? The prophet’s righteous impatience (if there is such a thing!) was wearing beyond thin.

Delay does not mean that judgment is forgotten. God works on His own timetable, very patiently, thoroughly, and, yes, eventually in devastating judgment against those who rebel against Him. See 2 Peter 3:8-10.

C. Verse 2 refers to the problem in a single word, and verses 3-4 give a lengthier explanation of the problems that Habakkuk saw in the society.

1. **Violence.** The exact nature of this violence is unknown. The Hebrew word is a general word – “Hamas” – that can mean violence or a person who does violence or is a false witness.
2. **Iniquity.** Injustice. Sin abounded during Habakkuk’s life. Deception was rampant.
3. **Trouble.** Another word for this is wrongdoing. Distress or misery.
4. **Plundering** (destruction) and violence. Things were getting physical there. The rule of law had broken down. Crime was rampant. Probably the poor were oppressed because of their lack of ability to fight back.
5. **Strife** and **violence.** Verbal, political, and possibly religious contentions may have been everywhere. Violence is a repeat of the first word in this list, in verse 2.
6. A **powerless law.** The law is ignored because it was not faithfully enforced. Eccl. 8:11. It meant nothing. Because of this, adultery, divorce, and all manner of sin went unchecked.
7. **No justice.** A man could be accused and convicted of something he did not do. A man who did something awful could be acquitted, if he was even brought up on charges.

8. The **wicked** are over the righteous. People like to have somewhat wicked leaders so that they can do their wickedness without consequence. But righteous people don't at all savor that kind of leadership, and in fact find it oppressing and depressing.
  9. **Perverse judgment.** Justice is not served. In fact, inverse justice happens, where the righteous are persecuted and the unrighteous prosper.
- D. This all sounds kind of familiar, doesn't it? The relevance of this to our situation today is transparent. Abortion; murderous crime in the cities; vigilante-ism like happened in Georgia recently; slavery and human trafficking; immorality of all sorts; censoring of different viewpoints than the party line; using the justice system to ruin or otherwise persecute political opponents; unbelief at the highest levels of government; and generally calling good evil and evil good. While there is much justice for which we can be thankful, there is too large a measure of things that match what Habakkuk experienced.

**Transition:** In the next section, we see God's reply to Habakkuk's question. It starts without introduction in verse 5. We can tell from the change in tone, content, and the evidently different speaker. "I am raising up the Chaldeans..." is something that only God could do, not the prophet.

## II. God's Reply, v. 5-11 (May 17, 2020)

- There was injustice. It has gone on for a long time. The prophet is basically asking if God is going to do something about it (!). God says that He will, and it will be bigger than the people can imagine.
- A. It will be a shocking surprise, v. 5. If someone told you in January that the *world* would basically be shut down and over 20 (30?) million jobs would be lost in the United States in less than two months, would you have believed them? Stand back and take a high-level look at the nations. What do you see? You probably note chaos, fear, authoritarian takeovers of many aspects of life, confusion, workers idled, budget shortfalls because of lack of wealth production, increases in mental health problems, and many other things. If you are like me, there is an element of this that is utterly amazing.
1. That is the kind of thing that God told Habakkuk. Watch and see, for what is coming is something that will shock you. It is going to be a big judgment for what the nation has done. In fact, God is going to tell them plainly in the upcoming verses what it is. But it will seem so out of the realm of reality in their minds that they will refuse to believe it.

Being forewarned, they should not be surprised, but they still will be. Some will not listen to the forewarning. For others it may not sink in. The disciples of Jesus had a similar experience, but not one of judgment. He told them about his impending death and resurrection, but at first they did not understand it (John 12:16), and after it happened, they initially did not believe it even though they had been foretold (Luke 24:10-11)!

2. It will happen “in your days” – in your lifetime. This is a near-term prophetic announcement. It was not going to require a wait of dozens or hundreds of years like many Biblical prophecies.
3. The Lord here is not speaking only to Habakkuk. He says “You all see...you all pay attention...you all be astounded...in you all’s days...which you all would not believe.” He is speaking to the southern kingdom as a whole. God is doing something with the nation and telling them all in advance.
4. See Acts 13:38-41. Paul preached the resurrection of Christ and that He was the one who could provide forgiveness of sins. Every person who believes in Christ will be made right with God, something no law could do. Paul then adapted Habakkuk 1:5 in his preaching to indicate that if you do not believe in Christ, an awful judgment will await you. Notice that he is not re-interpreting or changing the meaning of the prophet. The prophet is speaking of an awful, surprising judgment, pre-recorded in the Word; Paul is focusing on the similar concept of a judgment so surprising that it won’t be believed by those who experience it, even though it was plainly foretold. There is no excuse for not knowing. God has been telling humans for thousands of years that if we do not repent, we will perish. The words of Christ echo across two thousand years: “if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24). Do not get caught up in surprise about this, my friends. You are not in the dark that this should overtake you like a thief (1 Thess. 5:4).

What impresses me about Paul’s use of this in his preaching is that he is so familiar with the text of the Hebrew Bible that he can use it and adapt it as he speaks. He knows the context as well as the verse, and he adapts the words of the verse to his own use. There is no implicit requirement that you have to fit the entire context of a text to make another related point. You can use the text to evoke a memory of the earlier text—in this case, the shock-and-awe judgment of God during Habakkuk’s day--to make a similar point today. Those who are lost will

be judged with severity and they will be surprised despite being told. It is well-known in advance because the Scriptures have reported it.

5. This also reminds me of the passage in Isaiah 53:1, “Who has believed our report?” The idea that people hear from God and subsequently do not believe is common. John in his gospel at 12:38 quotes this very verse to explain why 12:37 was true, that not many people believed in him.

B. God is raising up the Chaldeans to serve Him, v 6a. God’s judgment on Judah’s sin will be performed by the Chaldeans (same as the Babylonians, under Nebuchadnezzar). God will use them as his instrument of judgment.

1. Note first of all that God says “I am raising up...” This is not something for which God is blameworthy. Rather, He is able to use whatever instruments He righteously chooses in order to carry out his purposes. Note Ezekiel 14:22, Jeremiah 44:2, as well as Jer. 42:17 and 18:11. There are at least a couple of dozen verses that say the same thing. The blame belongs to the sinful people who merited punishment; the cause for that action is God.

2. This will become a point of question later for Habakkuk because of the great evil of the Chaldeans. It would be like God telling America that He plans to use the Chinese or the Russians to punish us for our iniquities. As a nation, we deserve it. But we might be just as frustrated because we judge those nations to be more wicked than we are. What would be our basis for such an evaluation? Perhaps, we think, they do more abortions than we do—perhaps as many as 20 million per year, as opposed to our now under 1 million. Or, they persecute Christians much more than we do—clearly true. Or other things. But, a lesser wrong is not justified by a worse wrong, if we can even evaluate wrongs that way.

C. The fierceness of Babylon is detailed in vv. 6b-11. The remainder of the section speaks of the dreadful warfare and horrible atrocities committed the Babylonian army. About them God says:

1. They are bitter, ruthless, fierce. A quick search of secular history will yield some information about the cruelties of the Assyrians, but they had basically been defeated by Babylon. We do know this: in Jer. 39:6-7, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the sons of Zedekiah to be killed while he watched. Then he had Zedekiah’s eyes blinded. He killed all the officials / princes of Judah also (Jer. 52:10). This was not unusual for the time.

2. They are hasty, impetuous, hasty, greedy, reckless (but successful).
3. They are fast-moving. This was an early form of blitzkrieg.
4. They conquer lands that do not belong to them. In other words, they over-step the boundaries that God has set out for them (Acts 17:26). There is something very important in God's design about the stability of national borders. Without thinking too deeply about it, we can surmise at least that when borders change, there is great upheaval in the human condition in those regions, and this is not good for the flourishing of the human race in those locations.
5. They are terrible and dreadful
6. "Their judgment and dignity proceed from themselves." The idea is that they are the judge, jury, and executioner. They decide what is good and right for themselves, without an external standard such as God to guide them. They are all-powerful in their own estimation.
7. Their horses and riders are swift and deadly.
8. The point of existence is to do violence. That is like their "food."
9. They are set to do evil, like the east wind moves without anyone stopping it.
10. They take prisoners without number.
11. The persons of kings and the structures of defense mean nothing to them. They overcome them all.
12. They sweep through like that east wind and keep on going.
13. They are idolatrous in the sense that they ascribe to their collective power the status of a god. They view themselves, in effect, as a god. It is possible also that this means they ascribe their power to their god.

## Conclusion

Habakkuk probably got a little more than he had expected when he asked God the question in verses 2-4. Will God hear the prayer and save the nation? Yes, we suppose He will say--but first He is going to tear down the nation because of its sin in order to accomplish that greater work of saving the nation from its sin.

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