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Through The Bible

— Habakkuk —

Habakkuk: An Introduction



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- This book is unique. The prophet is not speaking to the people on behalf of God; he is speaking to God on behalf of the people.
- The underlying issue of the book is the struggle with why evil seems to be prospering.
- The time frame seems to be somewhere between 625 and 575 BC. This was a time of political and spiritual upheaval, both internally and externally.
- Externally, Assyria was giving way to Babylon, which created uncertainty
- Internally, there was a series of bad kings who led Judah away from God's will
- There is some debate over who the evil people are that Habakkuk is crying to God about. Is it the Assyrians? Is it the kings of Judah? Is it the people of Judah? All the above?
- How does the prediction of Babylon's invasion in 1:5-11. Are the Babylonians God's way of dealing with the evil about which Habakkuk complains? Or is a way of saying things will get worse before they get better? Or could it be both?

Themes in Habakkuk



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- There is room for honest doubt expressed through prayer in the life of God's people. (Honest doubt assumes a posture of confidence in God's existence and His goodness.)
- True righteousness ultimately requires living by faith rather than relying solely upon human logic and human wisdom. (Habakkuk was central to Paul's understanding of faith.)
- God is just and good, even if that does not work itself out in our immediate circumstances. God is working through a bigger picture of reality.
- Salvation does not necessarily mean comfort or deliverance in the now. It means trusting in God's ultimate purpose, which will involve redeeming his people.
- God is sovereign and can use all things, even human evil to accomplish his purposes.

Themes in Habakkuk



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- Such a word from God implies that the turmoil and violence and death in our societies may not be evidence of God's absence from our lives but instead the witness to his actual working in judgment as he pursues his purpose. No event in human history, therefore, is to be understood as completely divorced from his lordly action and will. God is always at work, always involved, always pressing forward toward his kingdom. But the means by which he chooses to pursue that goal may be as astounding as the destruction of a nation or as incomprehensible as the blood dripping from the figure of a man on a cross
- Elizabeth Achtemeier, as quoted in Kenneth L. Barker, [*Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*](#), vol. 20, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 282.

Habakkuk 1:1-4



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- Nothing is known about Habakkuk other than the fact that he claimed to be a prophet of God. The fact that the book bearing his name has been preserved means that others recognized that authority.
- Most prophetic books begin with God’s complaint against his people; this one begins with the prophet’s complaint against God. Why does God allow evil to continue to flourish.
- The complaint takes the form of an unanswered prayer. “How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?” This is not a case of abstract theological speculation. It is the painful, personal cry of someone’s experience of deceit, violence, and strife.
- At the center of the complaint is the restraining of God’s justice – the divine order that is supposed to regulate how the world operates in accordance with God’s will. For now, that justice is perverted. The wicked seem to prosper in the face of it.
- Most likely, this refers to the wicked of Judah, who violate the covenant.

Habakkuk 1:5-11

- God does respond to Habakkuk’s prayer, but in a surprising and unsettling way. Prayers of the faithful do not go unheard.
- God will respond to the evils in Judah with the evils present in Babylon! He will use the Babylonian army to execute his judgment and punish his people.
- God then goes into alarming detail about the power and the brutality of Babylon. They are so powerful that it seems they are “a law to themselves. (v.7)” They worship their own strength (v.11)
- In the face of such power, everyone should be afraid.
- The remarkable thing is that God will use the evil and violent intentions of the Babylonians to execute his judgment.
- It is likely that the Babylonians were already ascending to power (v.5). God was already at work.
- Can evil and suffering be a channel through which God works out his purposes?

Habakkuk 1:12 – 2:1

- God's answer prompts a second question from Habakkuk. Could God really do such a thing? How or why could he use a wicked nation like the Babylonians to carry out his holy purposes?
- God is holy, so it seems strange that he would use the evil of the Babylonians rather than preventing it.
- The passage goes on to describe how the Babylonians have treated other nations. They have conquered other people the way someone catches fish with a hook or a net. They have prospered off the ruthlessness they have inflicted on others.
- In verse 17, Habakkuk wonders if God will continue to destroy the nations without mercy.
- He then announces he will wait to see how God will respond. He is honest with his question, but he is humble in his willingness to allow God to respond in his own time and way. There is no obvious presumptuousness in Habakkuk.

Habakkuk 2:2-5



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- God does answer. It may not happen on the timetable or in the way we expect, but the Bible presents us with a God who does answer. He engages with his people.
- Habakkuk is told to write the vision down so that others can read it. God wants to make his response to his people as visible as possible. He is a mystery, but he is a mystery who reveals himself.
- In verse 3, the fulfillment of God’s response will await its “appointed time.” God will not act before he has determined to act. In the meantime, the vision/message (i.e. Scripture) is written down so that we may know it is true and is coming.
- The actual answer to Habakkuk’s question comes in verses 4-5. The message draws a contrast between those who are greedy, violent and evil and those who are righteous. The righteous live by simple faith in God, while the greedy and violent never have enough.
- See Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, and Hebrews 10:38
- See Matthew 7:16

Habakkuk 2:6-20



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- These verses describe how God will respond to the wicked. If Habakkuk wonders how or why God would use an evil nation like Babylon to carry out his purposes, these verses make it clear they will "get what they've got coming to them."
- There is a series of woes against Babylon (or anyone like them). "Woe" is a pronouncement of judgement or doom. Babylon is doomed because of its violence, its injustice, its manipulation, and its abuse of others.
- While God will use the evil of Babylon to accomplish his purposes, he will also punish Babylon for its evil. This the way of our sovereign and holy God.
- The passage ends with a warning about idolatry, of which Babylon was guilty. When we worship created things instead of the creator, we are setting ourselves up for destruction.
- We become like that which we worship.

Habakkuk 3:1-19



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- The book closes with a prayer that centers on an affirmation of God’s goodness in spite of all the evil Habakkuk sees around him.
- How does Habakkuk know God is good?
- Answer: Because of what God has done in the past. God acted in concrete ways to create Israel, to rescue them from slavery, to lead them through the wilderness, and to settle them in the Promised Land.
- In short, God made a covenant with Israel, which is proof of his goodness.
- Now, the prayer is for God to repeat in the present moment what he has done in the past.
- In time, God did. In 539 BC, Persia defeated Babylon. God acts in history in concrete ways to demonstrate his goodness.
- Sometimes, we are forced to live “in the meantime” with only the remembrance of his past actions and his promise of future actions.

Conclusions

- Life is filled with difficult questions for which there are no quick and easy answers. Two of the most important are:
- Why do the righteous suffer?
- Why does God seem to be so silent?
- The book of Habakkuk does not easily resolve these questions, except to say that in his time, God does answer.
- Two problems for us:
- Sometimes the answer comes later than we want
- Sometimes the answer comes in a way we do not like.