
Commentary

The Message of Habakkuk for Today

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The book of Habakkuk offers a message of hope for God's people. Habakkuk's name derives from the Hebrew verb meaning "to embrace." When trouble and suffering come, where else do we want to be but in the comfort of God's embrace? Habakkuk shows that kingdoms rise and fall, "But the LORD is in his holy temple" (2:20). As Christian readers of Scripture, we must ask, "How does Habakkuk and his dialogue with God witness to Christ

and God's redemptive plan?" The storyline of Habakkuk traces a prophetic dialogue between the prophet and God, centred on the rise of the Chaldeans (Babylon) under the LORD's hand as a punishing force in the world and upon His people (1:6). Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah, and the book of Habakkuk was most likely written between 605 and 587 BC. He prophesied in Judah during the days of Josiah (640 BC) and the early part of the reign of Jehoiakim (608-598 BC).

The structure of Habakkuk is straightforward: Habakkuk laments twice to the Lord (1:2-4; 12-17), and each lament is followed by God's response (1:5-11; 2:1-5). God's second answer includes a taunt composed of a series of woes directed towards the Chaldeans

(2:6-20). The psalm in chapter 3 concludes the book (3:1-19).

Habakkuk's first lament questions God's concern for justice. Habakkuk poses two questions to the LORD: "How long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear?" (1:2) and "Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance?" (v. 3). Habakkuk's complaint centres on his concern that the law be upheld and justice carried out in the face of consuming wickedness, destruction, and violence (vv. 3-4). Habakkuk's lament asks God to "hear" and to act rather than "idly looking at wrong."

God responds to Habakkuk in kind. Habakkuk had asked God to "look" here and respond. God tells Habakkuk to "Behold ye among the heathen, and regard" (v. 5). Open your eyes! God is doing something far greater than

Habakkuk expected. God was raising up the Chaldeans in judgement against Judah (v. 6). This should not surprise Habakkuk. God had previously raised up Assyria as a rod of discipline against Israel (Isa. 10:5). The description of the Chaldeans is particularly heinous and fearsome. They act as a law unto themselves, moving across the earth and devouring kings and kingdoms. Their own might is their god (vv. 7-11).

In his second lament, Habakkuk recognises God's eternality. He addresses Him as "O LORD my God, mine Holy One" and "O mighty God" (vv. 12-17; cf. Deuteronomy 32). Habakkuk recognises the Chaldeans as the vessel of God's judgement and again appeals to God's sight, asking, "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest

thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?" (v. 13). Furthermore, Habakkuk's lament depicts mankind through fishing imagery, with the Chaldeans pictured as clearing the sea. This imagery leads Habakkuk to question the Lord, "Shall they therefore empty their net, and continue to slay nations without pity?" (v. 17). Habakkuk's second lament ends with the picture of himself as a watchman on a tower, watching "to see" how the Lord will answer concerning his complaint.

The Lord's answer expands on Habakkuk's watchman imagery from 2:1. The Lord commands clarity about His message. What the Lord has said will come—it will not delay (vv. 2–3). Habakkuk 2:4 is central to Habakkuk's message, "Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith." Here we are presented with a

contrast between kingdoms and peoples. The proud Chaldeans are contrasted with the righteous who live by faith. The heinous depiction of the Chaldeans is further developed in the series of taunts in 2:6-20, where they are pictured as plunderers of nations (vv. 6-8), conquerors (vv. 9-11), builders with blood (vv. 12-14), shameless (vv. 15-17), and idolaters (vv. 18-20). The Lord will not allow their wickedness to go unpunished. The series of taunts ends with a call for silence—the Lord is in His holy temple (v. 20).

Habakkuk then responds to the Lord with a prayer—a hymn of victory. Thus, his lament ends in praise. God is portrayed through cosmic divine-warrior imagery drawn from creation and the exodus. Habakkuk's response is fitting and reflects the faithful: "O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid" and "When I

heard, my belly trembled.... I might rest in the day of trouble: when he cometh up unto the people, he will invade them with his troops" (vv. 2, 16). Habakkuk's expression of faith is further clarified in his statement of confidence in the LORD in 3:17-19.

When we consider Habakkuk's witness to Christ, we see several connections with the New Testament. First, Habakkuk depicts the righteous, particularly their suffering and vindication. Habakkuk asks, "Wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?" (1:13). At the cross, we see Jesus, the righteous One, devoured by the ungodly (Matt. 27:32-44). In His death, Jesus experiences the Father's silence (Matt. 27:46). Yet Jesus's trust in the Father is

vindicated in His resurrection (Matt. 27:43; Rom. 1:4).

A second connection is the divine-warrior imagery applied to Jesus in the New Testament. Jesus displays the same creative power in the Gospels as depicted in Habakkuk 3—walking on water, stilling storms, and raising the dead. In the Gospels, we have a picture of Jesus's work of new creation and exodus. We all face the great enemy of sin and death, from which Jesus, the divine warrior, delivers us in His death and resurrection.

A third connection is the life of the believer. Habakkuk 2:4 is frequently quoted throughout Paul's epistles. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes that in the gospel, "the righteousness of God [is] revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith" (1:17). Faith comes from the "hearing" of the

gospel (something Habakkuk has emphasised) (Rom. 10:17). Similarly, Paul's central tenet in his letter to the Galatians is that "the just shall live by faith" (3:11). Additionally, Hebrews 11 offers us a full picture of those who have walked in faith before us. As we look to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, we can run the race set before us (Heb. 12:1-2) and say with Habakkuk, "Yet I will rejoice in the L ORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The L ORD God is my strength" (Hab. 3:18-19).

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