

Major Lessons from Minor Prophets **Trusting God's Goodness (Habakkuk)**

Lesson #8 for May 25, 2013

Scriptures: Habakkuk 1:1-17; 2:2-4; 3; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 11:1-13; Philippians 4:11.

1. While Job is a key book to describe—in some cases—why the righteous suffer, Habakkuk is the key book to describe why the wicked prosper. In neither case do these books give us the complete answer. Job was a pawn in the great controversy. Habakkuk was caught up in a desperate time when God had to allow the people of the southern kingdom of Judah to suffer a fate similar to what Israel had suffered about 120 years earlier.
2. There is no one else in the Bible by the name of Habakkuk. We are not even sure what his name meant. It may be derived from a Hebrew word which means “to embrace.”
3. It is difficult to determine exactly when this book was written. He does not mention any king or any specific event which we can positively identify for dating the book. The fact that he wrote about the Babylonians rising to power suggests that the book was written in the last one third of the 7th century B.C., sometime between 630 B.C. and 600 B.C. Those who believe that Habakkuk was complaining about injustices and violence being carried out by greedy Jewish landlords oppressing their Jewish neighbors and the poor around them would date the book early in that time period, during the middle years of Josiah's reign (628-625 B.C.). Those who believe that Habakkuk was complaining about the increasing violence carried out by the Babylonians would place the date of Habakkuk near the end of that time (ca. 605-600 B.C.).
4. Habakkuk was unique among prophets. All the other prophets carried messages from God to their audiences. Habakkuk spoke on our behalf to God. The book of Habakkuk might be described as a conversation between Habakkuk and God. Read Habakkuk 1:1-4. In Habakkuk 1:4, it seems like he was complaining about what was happening among the Jews themselves. Later in the book, it seems like he was complaining about what the Babylonians were doing. How do you compare the sins of Israel and Judah to those of the Assyrians?
5. Habakkuk 1:1-4 is in the form of a Hebrew lament.
6. Sometimes, when people ask for God's response, He is silent. But, in this case, the Lord responded to Habakkuk's lament. Read Habakkuk 1:5-10. God's response was a shock to Habakkuk who said, “God, how can you use a violent, pagan nation to punish your own people?” (Habakkuk 1:12-17) What was God trying to accomplish through the Babylonians?
7. Was it right and fair for God to do such a thing to punish His own people? Would God ever use the wicked as an instrument to punish the righteous—or should we say the “less-wicked”?
8. After he recovered from his shock, Habakkuk responded in Habakkuk 2:1, saying he would wait and watch. And God responded in Habakkuk 2:2-4. In Habakkuk 2:5-20, Habakkuk spelled out all the reasons why unrighteous people should be punished. They worship worthless idols and become worthless themselves. (Psalm 115:8) By contrast, “Yahweh is in His holy temple; let everyone on earth be silent in his presence.” (Habakkuk 2:20) Habakkuk closed his book with a fairly lengthy song and prayer. (Habakkuk 3) He talked about what the evil nations were doing; and then, he talked about the mighty power of God.
9. He concluded with a statement which is almost unbelievable for someone writing in his day. (Habakkuk 3:17-19)
10. Let us briefly review the historical background of Habakkuk's day. There were several prophets alive and active in Habakkuk's day: 1) Nahum most likely prophesied between 650 and 612 B.C.; 2) Zephaniah between 640 and 620 B.C.; 3) Jeremiah from 627 to 575 B.C.; 4) Habakkuk prophesied between 630 and 600 B.C.; 5) Daniel was taken captive in 605 B.C.

and continued to prophesy until 536 B.C.; 6) Ezekiel began writing in 593 B.C. and wrote through at least 571 B.C. He was likely taken captive in the conquest of Jerusalem which happened in 598/597 B.C.; 7) Obadiah probably prophesied between 590 and 580 B.C. As you can see, this was a very active time for prophets. Following are the kings of Judah at that time:

Manasseh	697-642 B.C.
Ammon	642-640 B.C.
Josiah	639-609 B.C. (Josiah's reformation - ca. 628 B.C.)
Jehoahaz	609 B.C. (for only 3 months)
Jehoiakim	609-598 B.C.
Jehoiachin	reigned only 3 months and 10 days (598–597 B.C.)

11. An interesting note on the book of Habakkuk is the fact that in 1947, a commentary on the book of Habakkuk was found in one of the caves near the Dead Sea. It quoted the Hebrew of Habakkuk from Scripture and then commented on it. It covered the first two chapters of Habakkuk and shows that in approximately 100 B.C., the book of Habakkuk that they knew is virtually identical to the book of Habakkuk which we have today.
12. In our day when disasters happen, people often raise the question: "Why does God allow so many evil things to happen?" There are several answers to that question: 1) People bring evil on themselves - reaping the results of what they have sown (James 1:13-15). 2) People are in the wrong place at the wrong time and suffer the results of someone else's evil. 3) Some people suffer just because we are so far removed from the tree of life that heredity and lifestyles over the ages have produced many diseases, infirmities, and weaknesses. 4) As we approach the end of this earth's history, God is gradually withdrawing His Spirit from this world and allowing Satan to have more and more control. Satan has always wanted to have control of this earth (he claims to be our prince); and so, God will allow Satan to have a certain amount of control so that He can demonstrate in the larger setting of the great controversy what it would be like if Satan were put in charge permanently. 5) Occasionally, as in the case of Job, people suffer because they are pawns on the stage of the great controversy.
13. **What do you think the beings in the rest of the universe thought as they watched generation after generation going by and things getting progressively worse and worse?** Wouldn't it be natural for them to say to God, "Why are you wasting Your time with these people? Why don't You just let them go?" (Hosea 4:17; see E. G. White comments)
They must have asked this type of question repeatedly! But, God had a plan that He was working on that needed a little more time for conditions to become right for His Son to come and live on planet earth. (See Galatians 4:4) It would be interesting to know what He told the angels and the beings from other parts of the universe during the times of Habakkuk. They were willing to wait and trust God to see how He would work things out. (See Habakkuk 2:4)
14. **Is it true that if God really told us what He is doing, we would not believe it? (Habakkuk 1:5)** Could such a thing be true in our day? How does that fit with Daniel 9:19, *NIV*?—"For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name." (Compare 2 Kings 19:34; 20:6; Psalms 25:11; Isaiah 37:35; 48:9-11; Jeremiah 14:7,21; Ezekiel 20:9) **How much inspired material do we have available today? Do we read it?**
15. I am sure this was not the first time people were surprised by God's actions. What did they think when He sent the flood? **It is natural for us to take an egocentric approach to such questions. We want to know how it is going to affect us! But, in the larger picture, it is God's "name" and reputation that need to be preserved in all of this. The questions in**

the great controversy are not about us—everyone knows that we are sinners. The questions are about God. So, if we could forget about ourselves for a time and think about what all this is saying about God, we would probably get a clearer understanding of why things work out the way they do.

16. **What is the meaning of the last phrase of Habakkuk 2:4—“the just shall live by faith”?** (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38) **In the context in Habakkuk, what does it mean? What do you think Paul was thinking when he used it? What did it mean to Martin Luther when he started a reformation with it?** If we understand what faith really is, doesn't that imply that even in our time—as we see things going from bad, to worse, to even worse—that those who are truly righteous people will look back to the evidence they already have about God's trustworthiness and live by trusting in God? Faith leads to righteousness.
17. This verse has come to be a centerpiece of some of the most important theological passages in the entire Scripture. (Romans 1:16,17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:37,38) It is essential that we understand what it implies. **There are at least three major ways this phrase has been understood down through the years.**

1. Martin Luther said he remembered this phrase as he was on his knees climbing “Pilate's Staircase” in Rome. According to the story, as he thought of the implications of this phrase, he stood up and walked down the stairs. Some claim that was the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. To Martin Luther the phrase apparently meant, “Those who are legally forgiven because of their faith will live.” Since he was terrified of what God would do to him if he were lost, it was most important that his standing with God be “justified” or “declared righteous.” He reasoned that if God had fully forgiven him, then God would not need to punish him either in hell or purgatory.

2. Another way the verse has been understood is as follows: If one is “justified” or “declared righteous,” then he is legally qualified to live eternally in heaven “because of his faith.” Is it because faith makes us righteous (the real meaning of the word *just*)? Or, is it that “just” people are able to live because of their “faith”? Or, both?

3. A third way to look at this phrase is to look back at the original context and consider what was the most natural meaning in that context. God was saying to Habakkuk that things looked really bad; but, if Habakkuk was a friend of God, he would be willing to trust Him and wait. God asks us to allow Him to work with us to transform our lives. But, we must be willing to trust Him enough to be willing to do it in the way and at the time that He sees is best. **Thus, the original Greek expression (Romans 1:17) “righteousness” or “salvation” by “faith” could be translated, “God can and will save and heal all who trust Him.” Understood in this way, Habakkuk 2:4 means: Those who are God's friends because they have been healed and saved by trusting Him are willing to continue trusting Him and wait.**

18. When do you think the fulfillment of Habakkuk 2:14 (Compare Isaiah 11:9) will take place?—“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” (NIV) When do you think Habakkuk expected it to be fulfilled?

This is obviously a passage describing how things will be in the New Jerusalem after sin is completely eliminated. This is the way it should have been all along. Habakkuk probably had read this expression from Isaiah and realized that it was describing a time when “the Son of David”—the Messiah—would rule the world from the New Jerusalem. It certainly has not happened yet! In Habakkuk's mind, this would find its initial fulfillment with the overthrow of the Babylonians. **Isaiah repeatedly talked about the Jewish people being destroyed for “lack of knowledge.” (Isaiah 1:3; 5:12,13; Hosea 4:6) It is clear here and in Isaiah 11:9 that the essential knowledge is the “knowledge about God.” Certainly, Habakkuk was hoping that such a time would come as soon as possible. But, he must have recognized**

that it was not happening in his day. What do we need to know about God?

19. Did the prophets have a clear understanding of the impotence of idols? (See Psalms 115:1-8; Isaiah 44:9-20; 1 Kings 18:25-29) If it is folly to worship anything created, (Romans 1:20-23) what kind of folly is it to worship something you have created yourself? (Habakkuk 2:18,19)

The logic of the arguments in these passages is compelling! But, unfortunately, those who worship idols are not inclined to spend a lot of time thinking through the implications of what they are doing! This is an example of a type of behavior which is all too common even in our day. When someone wants to believe something, he is very inclined to believe it even if essentially all the evidence is against it. Why do people smoke? Why do people ignore the many clear commands in the Scriptures to keep the Sabbath holy? In this case, it is likely that the attractiveness of the promiscuous sexual orgies that were regarded as a part of the “worship” of idols drew people, even when it was clear that they were not “gods” at all.

20. Does the book of Habakkuk suggest that God may, in some way, be losing control? Is it possible that He might not be able to actually carry out what He has said? Notice Habakkuk 2:20—The way we worship says a lot about the kind of God we worship! “Be patient, wait, God is still in control!” What kind of God would give us such a message? Did Baal talk like that? Molech? Dagon? Did those “gods” demand quiet reverence and careful evaluation of what it meant to worship them? (See 1 Kings 18:25-29)

The message of Habakkuk seems to be that God is still in control. **Even when things look really bad, God can be trusted. Isaiah said that our bread and water will be sure. (Isaiah 33:16) Habakkuk seemed to suggest that he would rejoice in the Lord even when everything was gone! (See Habakkuk 3:17-19) If God is extremely intelligent (See Isaiah 40:10-31) and all powerful, (Isaiah 40-48) then His people can rely on Him. Idols have none of those properties!**

21. Could you comfortably agree with Habakkuk’s conclusion in Habakkuk 3:16-19?

In response to God’s request in Habakkuk 2:4, by the end of the book, the prophet seemed ready to leave everything in God’s hands. For someone living in a subsistence agricultural society, the conditions described by Habakkuk were just about as bad as it could get! But, Habakkuk had decided that he would trust God no matter what happened! That required real trust. And that is exactly what God had in mind when He asked Habakkuk to trust Him! (Habakkuk 2:4) As suggested by Paul, (Acts 16:31) since trust (faith) is the only requirement for salvation, Habakkuk had apparently succeeding in developing that essential relationship with God, a relationship which He would like to see in each of us. How many of us have it?

22. So, what does Habakkuk say to us about God?

God is sovereign. He rules over all nations. But, that same God wants to dialogue with each one of us. He cares about our questions. God sees the distant past as well as the near and distant future. He knows what is best for us, even though, at times, His actions may seem incredible! He asks us to give Him a chance. Wait, listen, and God will speak. Even when everything seems to be going wrong, God is still present. It may be difficult for us to watch as the wicked seem to prosper, but God includes them in His plans as well. When God needs to discipline His own children, He may use some unexpected means; but, He is still in control.

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