

Sunday, June 28, 2020

Bible Study **Habakkuk 2:1-4**

The environment that Habakkuk describes is one of systemic injustice and rampant evil. This was certainly the case before and after the reign of King Josiah. Josiah's father (Amon) and grandfather (Manasseh) were wicked kings. Each of them led Israel to do more evil than even the pagan nations that God had driven from the promised land; up to and including re-erecting the idols to Baal and Asherah that Hezekiah had destroyed and performing human sacrifice (*2 Kings 21:2-9, 20-22; 2 Chronicles 33:1-25*).

King Josiah, however, instituted sweeping reforms that saw the destruction of those idols his father and grandfather had built, a cleansing and renewal of the Temple, and the reading of the long neglected Book of the Covenant (Torah). During his reign (640-609 BC), justice and religious piety also reigned (*2 Kings 22:1-23:27; 2 Chronicles 34:1-35:19*).

It is unlikely that Habakkuk would be complaining about the miscarriage of justice and rampant evil during a time of increased vigilance in serving the Lord. It is, however, likely that Habakkuk is describing the time immediately following the death of Josiah which occurred in 609 BC. Pharaoh Neco's army was on the march to join forces with Assyria when Josiah attempted to intercept and destroy them. He was killed in that engagement and Neco set up a puppet government in Judah (*2 Kings 23:28-35; 2 Chronicles 35:20-36:6*).

The clearest evidence for helping us to date the circumstances of the book is found in 1:6, which mentions the "Chaldeans." The Chaldeans (*aka Babylonians*) were apparently not much of a threat to anyone at this time because God tells Habakkuk that He is going to do a work that will leave them wondering and astounded, a work that would not be believed if told to them (*1:5*).

The Chaldeans (Babylonians) destroyed the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 BC. They then went on to score a decisive victory over Pharaoh Neco at Carchemish in 605 BC, firmly establishing themselves as the regional power. So it is likely that Habakkuk was written during the reigns of Manasseh and Amon (687-640 BC) or some time after the death of Josiah in 609 and before the defeat of Neco in 605 BC. All before the new world power of Babylonia had emerged as a dominating threat to the entire region.

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Habakkuk has much to teach us about the meaning of faithfulness and righteousness, and about how, in the face of great difficulties, we can get on with the task of living now, enjoying the deep satisfaction of knowing who God is and that He is able to handle things, whatever those things may be.

While most of the prophets said, “Thus says the LORD,” or “thus the LORD is about to do,” Habakkuk said, “Why, LORD, are you about to do what you are about to do?” Twice Habakkuk complains to God about the world’s injustice (*1:2-4 and 1:12-17*), and twice God answers him (*1:5-11 and 2:2-20*). Habakkuk struggles with squaring the goodness and justice of God with the presence of what seems like unbridled evil and wickedness among men and nations.

He first complains to God about the evil around him and asks how long will this go on. God answers him by telling him that an even greater evil is coming to give answer to the first. This prompts Habakkuk to ask why God would answer the evil of Judah by sending the evil of Babylonia. In the end, Habakkuk learns that God’s ways are greater than his and that God uses nations and kingdom to do his will and bring His will on earth as it is heaven.

God teaches Habakkuk (and us) that we will at times be given exactly what we want. In Habakkuk’s day, Judah wanted a life outside of God’s law. So God gives them the lawlessness of the Babylonians. Bible scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier helps us to grapple with the shock of God’s justice using an evil empire to answer the evil of another. She writes,

The implications of such a revelation are staggering for our world, for 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.

And so Habakkuk concludes by placing God at the center of history, teaching us how to rejoice even when the lid has blown off everything, and nothing that we once counted on as a reference point remains fixed. A major theme of the book, “the righteous shall live by faithfulness,” instructs us how to live in this ‘in-between time.’ This time when evil appears to run rampant and THE time when

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God's kingdom and justice roll down like mighty waters (*Amos 5:24*). Habakkuk teaches us how to live by faith in a God who is alive and active in current affairs; distasteful, unappealing, and frightening as those affairs may be at times.

Questions for Further Reflection

What is amazing about the Lord's answer to Habakkuk (vv. 5-6)? The Babylonian invasion predicted here took place in 605 BC. Why do you think God chose to use ungodly Babylon (Chaldeans) to punish Israel? How is the Babylonian army pictured (vv. 7-11)? How does Babylon see itself (vv. 7, 11b)? What problem does this pose for Habakkuk? What do you find most concerning about the Lord's answer? How might God use scandals, terrorists, thugs, police states, and belligerent nations in our day?

What is the "net" (vv. 14-17)? What does it mean for the wicked to sacrifice to the "net"? How does the "net" support luxurious living? What is going on in 1:17 and 2:1, is Habakkuk resigning himself to fate, or casting himself on God? What symbols of power do we worship in our culture? How so? Have there been other times when the righteous have been swallowed up by the wicked? When? Why?

How do you respond when you are told to wait? What revelation is Habakkuk told to write down? Within the context of the book, who is "he" in verses 4-5? Compare 2:4 with Romans 1:16-18 and Galatians 3:10-14. How is Paul's emphasis like or unlike Habakkuk's? Find the five "woes" in verses 6-20. In verse 6a, who are "all of them" and who is "him"? What is the larger context for these woes (vv. 14, 20)? How does this oracle answer Habakkuk's original concern? What is the climax of the entire woe section (v. 20)?

Do you know people who are "puffed up"? How can you live by your faith (faithfulness) in his or her presence without also becoming puffed up? What or who builds an empire today like Babylon — with stolen goods, unjust gain, and bloodshed; drunk with power and encourages others to do the same? What would Habakkuk say to such a person or organization?

What final fulfillment of this prophecy do you see in Babylon's fall at the end of History (*Revelation 17-18*)? What encouragement are verse 14 and 20 to you? How does Isaiah 40 echo these passages from Habakkuk? (*see also Job 7:19; Psalm 6:1-3ff.; Psalm 13; Psalm 35:17; Psalm 74:9-11; Isaiah 6:11*). How is Jesus' "How Long?" a reply in echo to our own (*Matthew 17:17; Mark 9:19; Luke 9:41; John 14:9*)?