

We're going to spend the next three weeks looking at the book of Habakkuk, so I thought we should start with a bit of background. There are some unusual things about this book: firstly, most prophetic books involve God speaking to the people through the prophet, but in Habakkuk, the prophet addresses God – he still gets a message. Secondly, in ch 2 Habakkuk is instructed to write his message in large letters on a wall – either early religious vandalism or the first roadside advert. Thirdly, ch 3 is a prophecy set to music. It's also a book in which Habakkuk thinks God is being unfair.

The name Habakkuk means 'someone who embraces' and some commentators suggest it was a wrestling term put into colloquial language – he could have been called 'clinger'. He prophesied around 20 years after Zephaniah, around 600 BC.

There is a huge change between the first two and the last chapter:

<b>Chapters 1-2</b>	<b>Chapter 3</b>
Wrestling with God	Resting in God
Miserable	Happy
Shouting	Singing
Prayer	Praise
Impatient	Patient
Asking for justice	Asking for mercy
Down in the dumps	On a high
God inactive (present)	God is active (past and future)

In Israel, there had been ('background' on screen) no word from God for 20 years and the nation had continued its downward slide, in defiance of Zephaniah's warnings. King Josiah had not achieved what he had hoped for with his reforms – he was 8 when he became king and while he was still young they found the book of the law which had been lost. Josiah realised that they had been ignoring God and he repented and sent the priests to ask God what he should do. He gathered all the people of Judah together and they promised to follow God's law. He removed all idol worship and 2 Kings 22:2 it says he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord. He was killed in battle in 608 BC by the Egyptian Pharaoh Necho who set up Josiah's son Jehoiakim as king – but the price was regular tribute payments to Egypt, so the people of Judah were highly taxed. Bribery, corruption, lawlessness and oppression filled Jerusalem and the streets were not safe.

It was into this that Habakkuk came. Before the Babylonian empire came to power we have pictures and names of God in the Old Testament that make him

easy to worship and love. We praise Him because He is God. We get to see God, the creator of the heavens and the earth. He delivered the Israelite slaves out of bondage and slavery. He is a loving God who takes you back time and time again after you've failed Him.

Yet here in Habakkuk we see a characteristic of God that is hard to embrace. Do you believe that what a judge says has weight? If you don't, hang out in a courtroom for a few hours. I've been in courtrooms where every word that the judge speaks is listened to and hung on as if they were the very words of life and death. Will I go to jail? Will I see my child again? Will I be able to work? Will I be free from this abuse? Judgments have weight. Judgments are heavy. Judgments, can be a burden. So we have Habakkuk here with a burden of judgment on God's very own people.

God has gone from being a God of redemption and deliverance, to a God of justice. He has gone from speaking as a father to acting as a judge. Habakkuk has the questions that you and I have had as believers. The questions of, "Why?" and "How long?" But it was God that first asked those questions in Exodus when His people ignored how good He was, and how much He had done for them in the wilderness. You see God, sympathizes with Habakkuk but in return He asks, "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?"

You know what that tells me? That tells me it's ok to ask questions. It's ok to ask God, "What is going on here?" "What is happening?" "I don't understand." To ask, "Where is this going God?" "What am I to do?" Habakkuk asked the hard questions. "How long do I have to pray and cry out to You?" "Why do I have to go through this and see these terrible things? Why isn't anyone doing anything?" "Why aren't you doing anything?"

The problem wasn't that unbelievers were persecuting the Jews. It wasn't some enemy militia threatening their homes and families. It was God's own people who were full of violence and contentions against each other. Worse than violence is contention. Beware of anyone who is happy about someone else's trouble, someone else's tragedy and crisis. Those are contentious people that do not love God. Because of strife, because of contention, because of wickedness in God's own people, because of them violating the covenant He made with them, there is judgement promised because they have broken His commandments. Let me be very clear here before some of you start saying, "Well that was Old Testament. We're not under curses but under grace. Jesus paid it all. I can't be touched by curses or condemnation." In Acts 13:46, we see Paul and his young friend Barnabas in Antioch telling the Jews who reject Jesus and God's Word, "*We had to speak the word of God to you first; since you*

*reject it, and do not consider yourselves worthy of everlasting life, we now turn to the Gentiles.*” God’s people rejected Paul’s message and warnings, and Paul now says they will go over to the Gentiles.

That is exactly what Habakkuk sees with God’s people 650 years before. He sees God’s people rejecting God, breaking His commandments and serving themselves to the point of violence and contentions. He sees this and He wants to know why good people are struggling and the wicked are getting away with it. You know, maybe God doesn’t answer right when we want Him to. But when He does, He can do it in an awesome and overwhelming way.

One way that God answers Habakkuk’s questions is when He tells him to look at the international horizon. God is raising up another nation, the Babylonians or Chaldeans, for His divine purposes. And His divine purpose for His people is judgment and correction. Do you see the language He uses to describe the conquering army?

- Their horses are swifter than leopards.
- They are fiercer than wolves at dusk.
- Their cavalry gallops headlong; their horsemen come from far.
- They fly like an eagle swooping to devour.
- They all come intent on violence.
- They gather prisoners like a child would scoop up sand.
- They mock kings and scoff at rulers.
- They laugh at fortified cities.

You see, God will use what He needs to, to show us and teach us. And yes, He does discipline us. The funny thing about the Babylonians is that they rose and fell all within 75 years. Going from superpower to the back page in just a lifetime. That is short by history’s standards. Yes, God did raise them up but He brought them down. The bitter irony of God using a defile, profane, false god worshipping people to swallow up and bring judgment on His own people is almost too much for Habakkuk. And he responds with his second complaint.

You see, Habakkuk doesn’t have a weak faith. He has a perplexed one. To see God using this profane nation to defeat and capture the people of the, “Promised Land” overwhelms him and he asks God, “Aren’t You God!?! Aren’t You eternal? Aren’t You pure and holy?”

But you see, along with the beautiful promises of God is the conditional clause of severe discipline if they break His commands and His laws. But Habakkuk is so distraught, so devastated at the judgment that’s coming - He can’t grasp the full justice of God. So He asks, “How can You let these terrible things happen to Your people? Do something!” Think about this, God’s people will become

slaves of this evil, violent, fierce nation. They will lose their daughters to concubines and harems. They will lose their sons to be drafted in their massive army. They will lose their homes and land and possibly their lives. Is this a righteous way of God. Does God deal this way with his people?

Maybe Habakkuk is trying to provoke God. Because in a way Habakkuk is asking, “Are You, God, really behind all this suffering?” “Will this never end?” Are we really all like fish in the sea just being caught and gutted over and over again?

No doubt, Israel needed correction. They were brutal, they were wicked, they were contentious, they didn’t know what justice was. “But God, do you have to do this?” We look at Syria, Iraq and Iran – that’s where these great empires came from and the land over which they fought. We see Russia, China, USA trying to gain influence in the world in a whole variety of ways. We see the rich getting richer and justice for sale. Politicians of all hues help their friends. We see Christians arguing over support for a particular person, party or policy. Things are not much different now than they were in Habakkuk’s day. Just in case you still think this is an OT issue:

If we could just get a grasp of what Jesus had to suffer, it would blow our minds! Before Jesus went to the cross where did He have to stop? The Garden of Gethsemane. Or literally, “The place of pressing”. Jesus knew that the same thing that the grape and olive went through... was the same thing that He had to go through. Jesus struggled with what God was going to do to save his people. It is as if he has asked the Father what comes next and he receives an answer that he can’t believe. Olive oil can only come when the olive has been under pressure. So when Jesus got ready to go to the cross He had to stop at the garden of Gethsemane to let the world know, that, “You may press Me on Friday, you may press Me on Saturday, but Sunday morning... I will rise! On the cross Jesus cried, “Why have you forsaken me?”

Your trouble will stop when it has finished what God has sent it to do.

Have you ever gone through something in your life where you’re like, “I don’t even know if God is hearing my prayer?” “I don’t even know if I’m saved or not? I don’t feel any glory, I don’t feel His presence, I feel so dried up and done.” Well I’ve got news for you - you’re just right for God to break loose in your life. For as sure as His judgment comes - so His mercies come - they are new every morning.