

THE FALL OF JUDAH

Lesson 51

Judah's Fall – Part Three (Habakkuk)

God blessed us Lanier children with a godly home. Both of our parents had a very real faith that was important to how they lived their lives. As we grew up, it never occurred to us that there was no God, or that the Bible was not true. On one occasion, when we lived in the Northeast where the nearest church that my parents felt appropriate doctrinally was over an hour drive, we would have church in our home each Sunday.

In the middle of 7th grade, my family moved from the Northeast back to Texas, and in Lubbock, we would go to church every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. Throughout high school, I was very involved in our youth group, going on mission trips, seizing opportunities to teach and speak, and making a point to be involved in each activity.

As I transitioned into my twenties, I had, in a sense, two aspects to my faith – a cerebral faith and an experiential faith. The cerebral faith was my intellectual faith. It was the rational reasons I believed in God and the truth of his revelation. The experiential faith was the internal recognition that I was involved in a relationship with the Divine that was real and important to me. The twenties saw a number of challenges to my life. There were times where I grew to have serious intellectual concerns over the validity of Scripture as Holy Writ, as God's communication to humanity. There were times where my cerebral faith, my intellectual recognition of God as understood in the Christian tradition, was rocked and challenged. These were times that frightened me. It was during these years that my experiential faith saw me through. Even when I had intellectual uncertainty, the words of Paul, still reflected what my experience confirmed,

I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day (2 Tim. 1:12 KJV).

My personal relationship saw me through the rocky intellectual waters, and that turned out to be a good thing. As I transitioned into my thirties, life contained some surprises that rocked my world. It was in this time that I had serious experiential doubts about God: Why didn't he hear me? Why didn't he do the right thing? Why wasn't he controlling the world the way Scripture seemed to indicate he would? These challenges led me in experience to question God's very existence. It was then that my cerebral faith held me fast. In the face of my own questions, which echoed that of the Psalmist in Psalm 42:3,

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Where is your God?

My mind guided me to the mental assurance of that Psalm that in spite of what I *felt* I could uplift my self with the intellectual assurance:

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; ***for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God*** (Ps. 42:5, 6; 11, Ps. 43:5¹)

I still find it fascinating to see how God navigated me in faith through these different channels. These life events are not unique to me; I suspect many of you have had your own experiences that echo some aspect of mine. The prophet Habakkuk certainly did. Prophesying at a critical juncture in Judah's history, Habakkuk was challenged to understand the actions of God. They did not seem right or consistent with God's character. It almost seemed as if God were not there, or at least not paying attention. The dialogue between Habakkuk and God became the book we call "Habakkuk," and is the subject of this week's lesson.²

HABAKKUK – BACKGROUND AND BASICS

The Old Testament has a collection of books that are deemed writings of Prophets. As categorized by the Hebrews, these include not only the twelve "Minor Prophets," but also the "Major Prophets" of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel as well as the historical books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings.³ In

¹ In the Hebrew, Psalm 42 and 43 are one acrostic Psalm, with the first word in each verse forming each successive letter of the alphabet. In English Bibles the acrostic Psalm is broken into two Psalms.

² In this sense, Habakkuk reminds one of the dialogue between Job and God. Even more so when one considers the similar subject matter.

³ The other two sections of today's Hebrew Bible include the "Law" (*Torah*), which are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, and the "Other Writings" (*Ketuvim*), which include the other Old Testament books. This categorization is older than we can date. Going back to New Testament times, the categorization was sometimes divided into three parts, while at other times it was divided into two. Hence we read passages like Luke 24:44 where Jesus spoke of the three sections as the "Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (which is the major book in the "Other Writings" category). We also have repeated references from Jesus to the "Law and the Prophets" seeing the sections as two, including the "Other Writings" as a part of prophetic literature (Mat. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40; Lk 16:16; Jn 1:45, etc.) John Monson teaches his students that this categorization sets the *Torah* as the core and measure of everything. The Prophets then show how the principles of the *Torah* are lived out (and what happens when they are not). The Other Writings give specific encouragement and navigation through the ambiguities and challenges of life.

the writings of the prophets are historical books as well as prophetic oracles. (From this we have derived the term “Prophet Historian” for the writer(s) of Kings, etc.) Aside from the historical writings, the Major and Minor Prophets all fall into a fairly standard form. In them we read a collection of oracles or “Word from the LORD” often infused with some pertinent historical information. These oracles are not always assembled in a chronological order, but are generally put into some sensible order that drives home the major points and themes of the overall scroll (or “book” as we call them today).

A fair illustration might be a collection of short stories. When we come across a book that has collected short stories⁴, we must not assume that the stories are collated by chronological writing. Although our tendency in 21st century life is to think chronologically and linearly, it is not a fair assumption that the prophetic oracles occurred in the order in which they are collected in each book. Over and over the Bible illustrates that the Hebrew mindset was much more relational and much less linear.

A similar point for consideration is the division of these Biblical prophetic books into chapters and verses. We know that these divisions did not take place during writing or assembling. The divisions are the fruits of scholars working in the Middle Ages, so it is not fair to assume that these divisions always reflect an accurate Prophetic division into logical parts.

Among the prophetic writings, Habakkuk stands unique in several perspectives. Most prominently, Habakkuk does not read as a set of oracles or words from the LORD to his people. Rather than directly address the people of God, Habakkuk is a dialogue between the prophet and the Almighty. The first two chapters feature Habakkuk complaining (or “lamenting”) to God and the final third chapter contains a prayer/psalm (song). Habakkuk’s work seems clearly a composite of complaints and answers from God that took place over a number of years. Inherent in the verses are references and issues that help date the various sections.

Because of this unique nature of Habakkuk, the book is a bit of a difficult read simply going from chapter 1, verse 1 through chapter 3, verse 19. It is more clearly understood if we break it apart into sections beyond chapter and verse. By looking at the various parts of the dialogue, we are better able to follow the book as a composite whole. We are also better able to put its constituent parts into an

⁴ One collection I might recommend is *Bradbury Stories: 100 of His Most Celebrated Tales*, written and assembled by Ray Bradbury.

historical context so that we follow the meaning most likely for the original recipients of this prophetic work.⁵

As we begin consideration of the dialogue of Habakkuk, we should add that we know very little about the prophet himself. We can glean from his writings the era in which he lived. We can also glean that he was up on current events, and was conversant with the power structure in Judah and its known world.⁶ Beyond this knowledge found between the lines of his writings, we know little else. We turn, then, to the dialogue, breaking it up into logical sections of Habakkuk's complaints and God's responses.

⁵ We should note here that prophetic works were written for the hearers in their day, but also for hearers beyond the prophets' days. We have found a commentary (in Hebrew a "*peshet*" or an "explanation") on Habakkuk among the Dead Sea Scrolls. (We also have a Dead Sea Scroll *peshet* on Nahum, the prophetic book covered in our last lesson). Known as 1Q p Hab (meaning the "p" – *peshet* of "Hab" – Habakkuk scroll found in cave one at Qumran – 1Q), this scroll contained commentary on the first two chapters of Habakkuk. For a good translation and general discussion of this *Peshet*, see, Brownlee, William, *The Midrash Peshet of Habakkuk*, (Society of Biblical Literature 1979). In this commentary, we see the Dead Sea community understanding the prophetic words in terms of the events of their own day. This same appropriation of prophetic oracle in light of the days' events is seen in the way New Testament authors frequently found the prophetic expressions to be valid applications to their situations and circumstances. This point is made strongly in Smith, George Adam, *The Book of the Twelve Prophets*, (Hodder and Stoughton 1928):

"All criticism however, is preliminary to the real work which the immortal prophets demand from scholars and preachers in our age. In a review of a previous volume, I was blamed for applying a prophecy of Isaiah to a problem of our own day. This was called "prostituting prophecy." The prostitution of the prophets is their confinement to academic uses. One cannot conceive an ending, at once more pathetic and more ridiculous, to those great streams of living water, than to allow them to run out in the sands of criticism and exegesis, however golden these sands may be. The prophets spoke for a practical purpose; they aimed at the hearts of men; and everything that scholarship can do for their writings has surely for its final aim the illustration of their witness to the ways of God with men, and its application to living questions and duties and hopes. Besides, therefore, seeking to tell the story of that wonderful stage in the history of the human spirit- surely next in wonder to the story of Christ Himself- I have not feared at every suitable point to apply its truths to our lives today. The civilization in which prophecy flourished was in its essentials marvelously like our own."

⁶ There is a reference to Habakkuk as supplying food to Daniel when in the lion's den in the Apocryphal work *Bel and the Dragon*. This work was written in the interval between the Old and New Testaments and is generally deemed too late in composition to convey reliable historical information.

HABAKKUK - TEXT

Habakkuk's First Complaint (1:2-11)

Habakkuk starts right out of the box with a complaint that God is allowing the wicked to flourish to the detriment of his people:

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?
Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?
Why do you make me see iniquity,
and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.
So the law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
so justice goes forth perverted.

Scholars debate whether this time of oppression referred to the oppression of Judah's Assyrian overlords, of the power structure within Judah or of both. Most scholars see it as the power structure within Judah, recognizing that Assyria's interference in Judah waned and finally evaporated in the latter 7th century as Babylon destroyed the Assyrian Empire.

This historical time of Habakkuk was explored in the past lessons on the Fall of Judah, so only a brief recap is needed at this point. Although Assyria had dominated Judah for two hundred years, a weak king acceded to the Assyrian throne after the death of Ashurbanipal around 627 BC. This king lost the Empire to the Babylonians, in spite of aid from the Egyptian Pharaoh Neco II. The Egyptian Pharaoh came to the aid of the Assyrians who were battling the Babylonians, killing Judah's good king Josiah in the process (2 Chron. 35:20-27). After the death of Josiah, the people made his twenty-three year old son Jehoahaz king (2 Kings. 23:31). Jehoahaz was an evil king whose rule lasted only three months on the throne in Jerusalem. Pharaoh Neco likely deemed him as antagonistically as his father and after three months reign Pharaoh Neco pulled him from the throne and chained him up, placing a heavy tribute on Judah and setting up another son of Josiah as king (2 Kings 23:33-34). (The Pharaoh likely did this as he was returning to Egypt after futile attempts to help the Assyrians). This second son of Josiah was named Eliakim, but Neco changed his name to Jehoiakim.

It is likely that Habakkuk was complaining during this reign of Jehoiakim. The tribute Pharaoh had set on the land was significant, and Jehoiakim was an “evil” king in the sight of the LORD (2 Kings 23:35-37). These factors combined to make both sons of Josiah unjust and dishonest in their treatment of the people. 2 Kings 24:4 notes that Jehoiakim even shed innocent blood (see also the narrative in Jeremiah 26:20-24). It was an oppressive time as Habakkuk’s contemporary Jeremiah recorded:

Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages, who says, ‘I will build myself a great house with spacious upper rooms,’ who cuts out windows for it, paneling it with cedar and painting it with vermilion. Do you think you are a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? declares the LORD. But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence (Jer. 22:13-17).

This time finds Habakkuk complaining to God about the law as “paralyzed,” prohibiting justice from going forth, instead allowing its perversion as the wicked surrounded the righteous (Hab. 1:4). Habakkuk accuses God of standing idly by while Habakkuk and others contend with rampant iniquity, destruction of all that is right, and violence (Hab. 1:2-3).

After some unknown time period, God answers Habakkuk. The answer was, in some ways, more astonishing than the facts that gave rise to Habakkuk’s first complaint.

God’s Answer (1:5-11)

God’s answer to Habakkuk evidenced even more stunning behavior on God’s part than God’s allowing wickedness to flourish in Judah. God told Habakkuk that God was bringing punishment upon Judah, but the punishment would be from an even more wicked people!

Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.
For I am doing a work in your days
that you would not believe if told.
For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,
that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth,

to seize dwellings not their own.
 They are dreaded and fearsome;
 their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.
 Their horses are swifter than leopards,
 more fierce than the evening wolves;
 their horsemen press proudly on.
 Their horsemen come from afar;
 they fly like an eagle swift to devour.
 They all come for violence,
 all their faces forward.
 They gather captives like sand.
 At kings they scoff,
 and at rulers they laugh.
 They laugh at every fortress,
 for they pile up earth and take it.
 Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,
 guilty men, whose own might is their god! (Hab. 1:5-11).

God knew his answer would astonish Habakkuk. God was not simply judging Judah, but God was specifically raising up the Chaldeans to accomplish his purpose. (The Chaldeans are synonymous with the Babylonians.⁷) As history records, and as Habakkuk knew, the Babylonians were a “bitter” nation intent on taking whatever they could find. They had no justice or dignity. They were a violent people with no regard for any other culture or civilization.

A number of scholars use the language describing the oncoming Babylonian onslaught to help date this section of Habakkuk. In the Hebrew, a clear shift in the grammar shows that, while Habakkuk’s original complaint was a first person complaint (“I”), God’s reply addressed a plural audience. God was telling all of Judah what was coming. This work God was doing “in your day” suggests an imminent invasion of the Babylonians. That the people would not believe this invasion



⁷ Chaldea was a marshy area in the southern part of Babylon.

“if they were told” indicates to many scholars that this is a time frame of around 605 BC. This is seen to precede the Babylonian invasion into the Philistine territories that occurred in 604 BC, because once Babylon invaded Philistia, Judah was the next domino to fall.⁸ This message was similar to that of Jeremiah who had seen the Babylonians not only defeat the Assyrians, but also defeat the Egyptian army in the battle of Carchemish in 605. In Jeremiah 25, the prophet received a word from the Lord in the “fourth year” of Jehoiakim’s reign, which would date to roughly 605/604 BC, that Nebuchadnezzar would come against the land bringing destruction.

The language Habakkuk uses illustrates the military work of the Babylonians. They were “swift” in battle, using chariots and horses. After defeating the Egyptians at Carchemish, the Babylonian chronicles relate that the Babylonians chased the Egyptians 150 miles to Hamat where they again engaged them in battle defeating them. When the Babylonians came upon towns fortified with walls, they would “laugh” and “pile up dirt,” enabling them to use siege engines or simply use the dirt as a ramp to conquer the city.

The Babylonians were an arrogant, evil, dangerous people who worshipped their own might as god, yet these were the people that God chose to judge his own. This left Habakkuk stunned, as he related in his next complaint.

Habakkuk’s Second Complaint (1:12-2:1)

Habakkuk can hardly believe his ears! Was God truly going to take a more wicked nation and prop them up, using them to destroy God’s chosen people who, although wicked, were certainly less so than the Babylonians!

Are you not from everlasting,
O LORD my God, my Holy One?
We shall not die.
O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment,
and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.
You who are of purer eyes than to see evil
and cannot look at wrong,
why do you idly look at traitors
and remain silent when the wicked swallows up
the man more righteous than he?
You make mankind like the fish of the sea,
like crawling things that have no ruler.
He brings all of them up with a hook;

⁸ See, e.g., Roberts, J.J.M., *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: A Commentary*, (Westminster 1991), at 95.

he drags them out with his net;
he gathers them in his dragnet;
so he rejoices and is glad.
Therefore he sacrifices to his net
and makes offerings to his dragnet;
for by them he lives in luxury,
and his food is rich.
Is he then to keep on emptying his net
and mercilessly killing nations forever?
I will take my stand at my watchpost
and station myself on the tower,
and look out to see what he will say to me,
and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

This complaint begins with challenging language that effectively says, “Aren’t you still God? Aren’t you there? Aren’t you alive? Aren’t you supposed to be holy?” The complaint then notes that God is everlasting, and not supposed to die!⁹ How then, Habakkuk wants to know, can God ordain the Babylonians as judges? When God is too pure to look upon evil, how can God allow the greater in wickedness to swallow up the lesser in wickedness?

Habakkuk then uses illustrations that reverse the creation story of Genesis. Instead of God making the teeming fish of the sea and the creeping things on land on one day, reserving for the last act on the sixth day the creation of man, God has turned man into no more than the fish or creeping things made earlier. These were the things man was to have dominion over, not become like!¹⁰ Judah would be left leaderless like the fish, while the Babylonians live in luxury, thinking that they have might that enables them to do anything they please! This imagery of man as fish with no ruler or compass rightly reminds us of the call of Jesus to Peter and Andrew:

Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

⁹ The English Standard Version translates the end of verse 12 as “We shall not die,” but others translate it as referring to God, “You will not die, will you?” See, e.g., Roberts at 100ff as well as the New International Version. The issue for the scholars is whether later Jewish editors changed the original passage. There are 18 of these passages in the Old Testament where statements are made about God that are seen to have been “corrected” by scribes who thought the statements as violating true doctrine. For a discussion of this see the formative no real different message: “God is from everlasting, not dead, right?” Or “God is from everlasting, and we are not dead, right?”

¹⁰ Some scholars see here Habakkuk using language from Babylonian myth. For more on this consider, Cross, Frank Moore, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, (Harvard 1997)..

After voicing this complaint, Habakkuk pledges to wait and see what God will reply!

God's Answer (2:2-20)

God's eventual reply (we are not told how long Habakkuk had to wait for it) was an assurance that God would ultimately judge all evil in its time. Before giving his assurance, God instructed Habakkuk to write down a vision that was coming. Habakkuk was to write it clearly so that it would be a witness to people in the future.

And the LORD answered me:

“Write the vision;

make it plain on tablets,

so he may run who reads it.

For still the vision awaits its appointed time;

it hastens to the end—it will not lie (Hab. 2:2-3).

This vision needed recording because it was not simply for Habakkuk or for his day. The vision was a testimony of a future event that, while some might doubt its fulfillment, would certainly find fulfillment:

If it seems slow, wait for it;

it will surely come; it will not delay.

“Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him,

but the righteous shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4).

In these verses is a quotation used repeatedly in the New Testament. When we read Paul quoting this passage in Romans 1:17, understanding Habakkuk helps us better understand Paul. God assured Habakkuk that though the Babylonian nation (or king) was arrogant and sinful in his dominance, God's justice was around the corner and would eventually rain down. In this sense, Paul wrote the Romans,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

We need to first remember that for Paul, the word “gospel” was a reference to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ on behalf of humanity.¹¹ Unpacking

¹¹ We have a tendency to think of “gospel” as meaning the life of Christ, probably because of the four “gospels.” The Greek word is a composite of two words, “good” and “message” or “news.” THE good news for Paul, and hence THE gospel, was not the birth of Christ, nor even the life of

Paul's usage of Habakkuk, we see that Paul knew that in the cross of Christ, we were seeing the ultimate judgment of God upon sin and evil. The judgment includes imputed righteousness for those who "live by faith." Now, Habakkuk's writing of the Lord's assurance that "the righteous shall live by faith" is not some intellectual assent. It is an instruction that Habakkuk and others should wait in trust for the Lord to follow through on his promises.

Paul underscored the trusting part of faith when he quoted Habakkuk in Galatians 3:11,

Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for
"The righteous shall live by faith."

Habakkuk's instruction was not simply to "follow the code of commandments. Of course, Habakkuk was not told to disregard the commandments either. It was a disregard of God's instructions that had led to the evil and resultant coming judgment. God's instructions contrasted the arrogant Babylonian who trusted in his might and achievements with the righteous who would trust in the Lord. For Paul, the idea of self-righteousness was impossible. It would lead to boasting, just as assuredly as the Babylonians' achievements led them to boast. In this sense Paul echoed Habakkuk in Ephesians 2:8-9,

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, *so that no one may boast.*

If we return our consideration to the problem at hand in Habakkuk, after complaining to God about the injustices rampant in Judah; and after God's response of "Don't worry, I will end that! I will bring in an even worse nation to judge Judah and end Judah's sin;" and then after Habakkuk saying, "But that is even more unfair," God tells Habakkuk to trust and wait. God then introduces five "woes" upon Babylon. Habakkuk uses a Hebrew word *masal* that can appropriately be translated as a "taunt song." In modern parlance, God instructs Habakkuk that in time, remnants of the plundered nations will get to trash talk the actions and position of Babylon. Babylon's future is written, and it does not *end* in victory! God pronounces five judgment/woes upon Babylon:

Christ. THE good news, the "gospel," was the sacrificial death and resurrection. Paul makes this clear in 1 Cor. 15:1ff:

"Now I would remind you, brothers, of *the gospel* I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. ... *that Christ died for our sins* in accordance with the Scriptures, that he *was buried*, that he *was raised on the third day* in accordance with the Scriptures."

Shall not all these take up their taunt [*masal*] against him, with scoffing and riddles for him, and say,

“*Woe* to him who heaps up what is not his own—
for how long?—
and loads himself with pledges!”

Will not your debtors suddenly arise,
and those awake who will make you tremble?
Then you will be spoil for them.

Because you have plundered many nations,
all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you,
for the blood of man and violence to the earth,
to cities and all who dwell in them.

“*Woe* to him who gets evil gain for his house,
to set his nest on high,
to be safe from the reach of harm!

You have devised shame for your house
by cutting off many peoples;
you have forfeited your life.

For the stone will cry out from the wall,
and the beam from the woodwork respond.

“*Woe* to him who builds a town with blood
and founds a city on iniquity!

Behold, is it not from the LORD of hosts
that peoples labor merely for fire,
and nations weary themselves for nothing?

For the earth will be filled
with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

“*Woe* to him who makes his neighbors drink—
you pour out your wrath and make them drunk,
in order to gaze at their nakedness!

You will have your fill of shame instead of glory.
Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision!

The cup in the LORD's right hand
will come around to you,
and utter shame will come upon your glory!

The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you,
as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them,
for the blood of man and violence to the earth,
to cities and all who dwell in them.

“What profit is an idol
when its maker has shaped it,
a metal image, a teacher of lies?

For its maker trusts in his own creation
when he makes speechless idols!
Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake;
to a silent stone, Arise!
Can this teach?
Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver,
and there is no breath at all in it.
But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him.”

Among these verses we should underscore at least two things. First, Habakkuk is given assurance that a day would come when “the knowledge of the glory of the LORD” would fill the earth just as water fills the sea. A good argument can be made that Paul was thinking in these terms, in contrast to the story of Moses whose face was covered lest he observe the Lord’s glory, when Paul told the Corinthians that,

...we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18).

In Christ, the reach of God’s judgment and redemption knows no bounds. It is as pervasive over earth as water is in the sea. There is no person in any corner beyond the reach of God’s glory in Christ.

A second passage to underscore is the reference to the cup of wrath in God’s hand, which he is set to pour out in judgment over sin. This same reference is made in Isaiah 51:17, 22 as well as Jeremiah 25:15. It is in this sense that Christ in the garden prayed, “let this cup pass from me” (Mt. 26:39).

This section ends with the solemn proclamation that in the midst of injustice, in the midst of judgment, and in the midst of the time before the fulfillment of God’s assured justice, God remains God. God remains worthy of respect and worship:

But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him (Hab. 2:20).

Suddenly the situation is no longer about Habakkuk, Judah, or Babylon. There is something much more significant in play. The Lord is on his throne; The Lord is in control.

Habakkuk’s Prayer (2:2-20)

Habakkuk ends with a chapter-long prayer of praise. Scholars debate whether the prayer is a composite of older Psalms or prayers. Such is, of course, possible. I

certainly pray passages and phrases from Scripture as well as from songs and well-known phrasings. The thrust of Habakkuk's prayer begins with acknowledgment of God's grandeur and actions. Over and over, with poetic force, Habakkuk relates the power of God and his moving hand:

O LORD, I have heard the report of you,
and your work, O LORD, do I fear.
In the midst of the years revive it;
in the midst of the years make it known;
in wrath remember mercy.
God came ... His splendor covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
His brightness was like the light;
rays flashed from his hand;
and there he veiled his power.
Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed at his heels.
He stood and measured the earth;
he looked and shook the nations;
then the eternal mountains were scattered;
the everlasting hills sank low.
His were the everlasting ways.
I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction;
the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.
Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD?
Was your anger against the rivers,
or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses,

on your chariot of salvation?
You stripped the sheath from your bow,
calling for many arrows.
Selah
You split the earth with rivers.
The mountains saw you and writhed;
the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice;
it lifted its hands on high.
The sun and moon stood still in their place
at the light of your arrows as they sped,
at the flash of your glittering spear.
You marched through the earth in fury;
you threshed the nations in anger.
You went out for the salvation of your people,
for the salvation of your anointed.

You crushed the head of the house of the wicked,
laying him bare from thigh to neck.

Selah

You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors,
who came like a whirlwind to scatter me,
rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.
You trampled the sea with your horses,
the surging of mighty waters (Hab. 3:2-15).

This moved Habakkuk away from his earlier challenges and complaining. Habakkuk is much more responsive in faith, trusting in awe and fear, the God who had answered his earlier complaints:

I hear, and my body trembles;
my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones;
my legs tremble beneath me (Hab. 3:16a).

Habakkuk knew the right course was to trust and wait for the Lord to fulfill his promises:

Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble
to come upon people who invade us (Hab. 3:16b).

As Habakkuk closes his book, in the face of all his dialogue, Habakkuk is not challenging or questioning God. He is simply waiting on the Lord, with the faithful trust that God would place joy in his heart, would save him, would give him strength, and would give him a good place in life:

Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the deer's;
he makes me tread on my high places (Hab. 3:17-19).

Amen!

CONCLUSION

Cerebral faith and experiential faith – both can be challenged. While I discuss them as two separate things, I have learned in life that they are not so separate. Often when we lose focus on God and his righteousness, and when we lose our zeal for his will in our lives, we find that our cerebral faith lags. We begin to wonder whether God is in fact there, and whether we have in truth understood him, however so dimly. In this sense, an experiential faith is important because it draws us back into deeper fellowship and worship. As we experience God on his throne, as we recount his wondrous deeds, the intellectual questions become less daunting. God in his Spirit works in us as we draw nigh to him.

Similarly, when our experiences challenge our belief and trust in the Lord, when we like Habakkuk question whether there is a God who is at work and if so why is he allowing the garbage we see to happen – we are really making some poor intellectual decisions. God has always been one who oversees life in his timing. He has established this world and will bring its sin to judgment as and when he deems appropriate. God has never tied himself to our sense of justice or right and wrong. Justice is his character. Right is what he is. As we realize that, we move from complaining and into worship. Trusting in our God who has proven himself trustworthy.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“The righteous shall live by faith”* (Hab. 2:4).

Habakkuk discovered a time delay. God was bringing his plan to fruition and had even announced his judgment, but between the time of his finished work and his announcement there was a waiting period. Into this period Habakkuk was charged with living by faith and trust.

Today as Christians we also live in a time delay. God has dealt with sin, defeating it along with death on the cross, yet we still live in a time where the final end is not yet evidenced. We live in the “now and the not yet.” It is no wonder that we struggle in the present to live with the confidence in the future. Take heart from Habakkuk. Let his assurance that the divine warrior, YHWH LORD, will finish what he started – victory for his people.

Habakkuk’s prophetic book came true. Babylon did indeed come in judgment upon Judah as we will see in coming lessons, but Babylon did not have the last word. As God said, Babylon fell – and amazingly, the people of Judah survived in exile and returned to their land after God’s wrath had run its

course! Today Babylon is a heap of ruins, but Jerusalem is a thriving city! God will be faithful to his promise!

2. *“He sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet”* (Hab. 2:16).

Nebuchadnezzar had an awesome military. He gathered up opposing armies as a fisherman gathered fish in a net. There was great pride in this. Nebuchadnezzar effectively trusted in his military might and accomplishments, as one should be trusting in God. In that sense he “sacrificed” and “made offerings” to what he had rather than to the one who had raised him up as a tool [YHWH].

This should draw us into a careful examination: where are we putting our value and worth? Do we regard the things we have as what is worthy of devotion? Do we think we have success because of how we live with our talents and abilities? May it not be so! Let us remember that anything of merit or good comes from God. (James 1:17 – “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”) The only deeds we have that are worthy are those we do by his Spirit in accordance with his will. (1 Cor. 3:12-13 – “Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.”) At that point, of course, we have no room for boasting, but simply live in faith that our Lord will finish the plans he has for us and then bring us home!

3. *“Yahweh is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him”* (Hab. 2:20).

This was a hymn we sang in church when I was growing up. At the time I did not know it came from Habakkuk, but the song still always moved me to reverence. The Lord *is* in his holy temple. The Hebrew word for “keep silence” is an onomatopoeia. It is pronounced “hass!” It sounds like the English onomatopoeia “hush!” We need to each take time to hush! To be before him in silence, realizing and acknowledging who he is.

WANT MORE?

If you are going through a crisis and you would like confidential prayer, please email us at wantmore@biblical-literacy.com fully assured that your email will be treated with confidence and will receive our prayers.