

THE MINOR PROPHETS

HABAKKUK

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Habakkuk was a prophet who lived at a very turbulent time in the history of Judah. It was written around 609 BC when the situation in Judah was one of sin and godlessness. The book consists of a dialogue between the prophet and God, in which Habakkuk asks questions of God, and receives a reply he was not expecting. Habakkuk comes to understand what God is telling him and ends with a hymn of faith. Habakkuk may have been a Levite as the last part of the book is notated for music. The main theme of the book is that the just shall live by faith.

The book commences with Habakkuk complaining to God that he is surrounded by violence and evil.

- Violence is everywhere, evil deeds abound, 1:2.
- The people love to argue and fight, leadership is corrupted, 1:3.
- The law has become paralysed, there is no justice in the courts, and the wicked outnumber the righteous, 1:4.

The Lord's answer is unexpected. He says that He will raise up the Babylonians, who are a cruel and violent people, and He will use them to bring judgement and punishment upon Judah. The Babylonian Kingdom had just overthrown the power of the Assyrians, and the Babylonians were moving out to conquer new lands; Judah was going to be one of these.

This shocked Habakkuk. He asks God how He can use a nation, which is even worse than Israel to punish them for their sins. This seems to make no sense: how can a holy God use unholy people to do His will?

- They devour nations, 1:13.
- They treat humans like animals, or even like fish gathered in a net, 1:14-15.
- They praise themselves and deify their own power, 1:16.

Habakkuk asks God if He will let the Babylonians get away with their sin and succeed in their heartless conquests, 1:17.

God instructs Habakkuk to write His reply down. He wants the people to understand and remember it.

- God will bring Babylon down.
- God may use corrupt kingdoms and people to bring about His purposes, but this does not mean that He endorses or approves of them or their behaviour.
- All nations are accountable to God's justice.

The Lord then shows Habakkuk five areas in which the Babylonians, and indeed other nations who act like them, will be condemned.

- Plundering nations: soon they will be turned upon by those they have stolen from and the peoples they have murdered, 2:6-8.
- Dishonest dealings: the wealth they have stolen will not give security or protection, 2:9-11.
- Murder and corruption: the money and power gained through murder and corruption will all turn to ashes and be in vain when the earth is filled with the glory of the Lord, 2:12-14.
- Irresponsible leadership and misuse of natural resources: they will be disgraced and cut down, 2:15-17.
- Idolatry: idols and images made by man have no power, and the Babylonians are foolish to trust in them, 2:18-19.

- This section finishes by observing that the Lord is in His holy temple. All the world should be silent before Him, as He is the true God, 2:20.

The book then finishes with a psalm like prayer. This would have originally been set to music.

- Habakkuk praises God, 3:1-2.
- God appears in power, a divine warrior interceding for His people, 3:3-7.
- The Lord fights for His people, as He did in the Exodus from Egypt, 3:8-15.
- Habakkuk reaffirms his trust in God, 3:16-19.

We thus see Habakkuk's transformation from a man full of despair about his situation to a man full of faith and hope in his God.

What lessons can we learn from Habakkuk?

- As Christians we can, and should, ask questions when we do not understand what is happening in our lives and what God's plans are. However, we must ask these questions with the right attitude. If we ask in an attitude of faith and with a willingness to hear God can answer us, and what He tells us will have meaning in our life. If we ask with an attitude of unbelief, or criticism, God cannot get the answer through to us, or it will mean nothing to us. Because Habakkuk had the right attitude God could answer him, and he could eventually understand the purpose of God, even though the answer he was first given must have seemed illogical to his human mind.
- The righteous will live by their faithfulness to God, 2:4. We are called to live by faith in God; this is the heart of the Christian gospel. We cannot be made right by our actions but only by our faith in God. This book is a call to faithfulness, whatever the circumstances may be around us. In this time of great uncertainty and peril in the world we need to hold to our faith as Habakkuk did.
- We need to focus on what God has done in the past, and will do in the future, rather than what is going on around us. God will defeat evil, bring justice to all and rescue the oppressed in the future, just as he has in the past. Just as Habakkuk was told he must write these down and remember the promises of God in the future, so must we too remember the promises.
- We should praise God even when things seem bad, as Habakkuk was able to do: *"yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign Lord is my strength!"* 3:18-19.

Habakkuk Chapter 3 recalls how the Lord saved His people in the Exodus, verses 8-12, and makes allusion to the salvation that was to come through Jesus in verse 13. We also have 2:4 describing how the righteous will live by faith, showing the future coming of salvation by faith in Jesus. In Galatians 3:11-14 the apostle Paul shows that it is through faith in Jesus that we have life, and can then be blessed with the Holy Spirit in our life.

Habakkuk reminds us that the Lord is not a God who is absent; He acts sovereignly in all things so that His purposes come to pass. Whilst He sometimes acts in ways that would seem strange to us we can be certain that he remains a holy and merciful God who cares for us and will redeem the righteous through faith. We need to remain faithful and praise God.

"Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked. But the righteous will live by their faithfulness to God." (Habakkuk 2:4, NLT)