

**The “Burden” of Habakkuk**

*“For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay. See, he is puffed up: his desires are not upright—but the righteous will live by his faith.”*

Habakkuk 2:3-4

Habakkuk was unique among the prophets because he questioned God on behalf of his people. Most of the prophets we have studied were called of God to speak to the people. Of course, Habakkuk ends up speaking to us very directly as we overhear his dialogue with the Holy One. Much of our education comes to us this way. We grow up in families where we observe and learn from how our siblings interact with our parents. In the classroom we often learn from the questions that other students ask. This is how we learn from Habakkuk. His “prophecy” is all prayer. The word of the Lord comes to us through his prayer life, because he was not just speaking for himself when he voiced his soul-searching complaints, but for all those who were intent on being faithful to God. In the Spirit, he becomes our companion in the mystery and the mess of the human condition, rather than our instructor in a clearly defined divine perspective. He is a champion for those intent on discovering God’s perspective in the midst of life-threatening chaos. The means to that end is a dialogue between the prophet and God about the apparent failure of God’s justice, the horrible nature of human depravity and the necessity of faith and trust in the Sovereign Lord in spite of desperate circumstances.

We know very little about Habakkuk’s background because he chose not to tell us whose son he was, where he grew up and who was reigning in Judah. He must have felt that all that information was beside the point. From his description of the Babylonian threat, scholars place his prophecy during the time of king Josiah and king Jehoiakim, somewhere between 639-597 B.C. His instructions for musical accompaniment make sense if he were serving as a prophet in the Jerusalem temple (3:1, 19). He wanted full orchestral support when he made his final declaration in the temple.

In most versions, the first line of his prophecy reads, “The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.” From high school English, the word “oracle” connotes Delphi mysteries and Greek mythologies, but in Hebrew the word (massa) literally meant “burden” or “weight.” As a prophet, Habakkuk had been given by God a burden to bear—a problem to carry. He shouldered the weight that was entrusted to him. In other words, verse one reads, “The problem as God gave Habakkuk to see it” (1:1, The Message).

### **Disappointment with God**

There is a right way and a wrong way to carry this burden. Habakkuk shows us the right way. Some people use their disappointment with God as a platform for self-expression and as a way of endearing themselves to skeptics. They embrace doubt in order to foster credibility among those who feel let down by God, even though their hurt and pain has been caused by counterfeit religion. Some blame God that they were raised in a negative, narrow-minded, legalistic religious home. Or, they blame God for the suffering and pain in the world. You may have grown up with a “stick-figure” Jesus, but that is no excuse for your spiritual indifference and cynicism. You may have seen a lot of bad things happen to good people, but that is no excuse for blaming God for a sin-twisted, evil world. Disappointment with God can become an existential convenience for people who prefer pity to repentance. It is easier to dwell on the ways we have been sinned against than on the ways we have sinned. Instead of looking for the Savior it is easier to look for a scapegoat. Instead of submitting to God’s revelation it is easier to make excuses.

Disappointment with God can become the crutch that a society of victims leans on to perpetuate moral and spiritual weakness. Or, as in the case of Habakkuk, disappointment with God can drive us to God for answers that we may find hard to accept, but that we cannot live without. It makes all the difference in the world whether we tackle our disappointment with God egocentrically or theocentrically. Because Habakkuk wrestled with his disappointment with God through prayer, faith and courageous resolve, we have a real example of life-tested faithfulness and a true guide for the perseverance of the saints.

The first thing that Habakkuk did right was to pray out his pain and confusion to God. There are many alternatives to a wide-eyed, God-centered perception of sin and suffering. He could have turned a blind eye to the violence and injustice that

disturbed him. He could have talked *about* God theoretically or gossiped against God “behind his back”. Instead, he talked *to* God personally and passionately. He knew in his heart that the moral pain he felt over violence and injustice was not his alone, but belonged to God. That’s what made the silence of God so difficult for him to deal with.

His prayed-out-complaint is short, concise and motivated more out of his advocacy for others than concern for himself. There is no hint of whining and no attempt to impress. His lament is a bold, straightforward prayer to God on behalf of the righteous.

“God, how long do I have to cry out for help  
before you listen?  
How many times do I have to yell, ‘Help! Murder! Police!’  
before you come to the rescue?  
Why do you force me to look at evil,  
stare trouble in the face day after day?  
Anarchy and violence break out,  
quarrels and fights all over the place.  
Law and order fall to pieces.  
Justice is a joke.  
The wicked have the righteous hamstrung  
and stand justice on its head.” (1:2-4 the

Message)

Most people today seem to complain to God that there is too much suffering. This is undoubtedly true, but Habakkuk took the issue deeper. He complained that all the suffering was due to injustice. The wicked had free reign and the law was paralyzed. It was powerless to render justice. Instead of the wicked being held in check, they had the righteous hemmed in. The watchword for the day was “Violence!” Most people today feel that there is too much suffering because people are not tolerant enough, but Habakkuk felt there was too little justice because God was too tolerant. “Why do you tolerate wrong?” he cried out.

### **Embrace Judgement**

The second thing that Habakkuk did right was to listen to God’s answer. The Lord God agreed with the prophet’s concern for justice, but he responded in a

way that Habakkuk never would have anticipated. “Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own” (1:5-6). God was going to use an utterly ruthless, evil superpower, to bring down judgment on Judah. This is comparable to challenging God on the violence rampant in our nation and imploring him to do something about all the murders, rapes, abuse, and anger, only to be told that God had chosen Saddam Hussein as an instrument of judgment against our nation. This would be like complaining to God about America’s corporate greed, economic oppression, racism, and hedonism and being told that God was going to use Osama bin Laden to judge our nation. God had nothing good to say about the Babylonians. They were a terror to the nations, a law unto themselves, ferocious, unstoppable fighters, who laughed at all resistance. They were “guilty men, whose own strength is their god” (1:11).

Habakkuk could hardly believe it, yet he responded to God with the utmost reverence. He never forgot that he was addressing God. “O Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die.” He began with the truth he clung to, even as he struggled to comprehend the unthinkable. “O Lord, you have appointed *them* to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained *them* to punish.” How could this be? How could God use the dreaded Babylonian army to bring about judgment and justice? Habakkuk continued, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”

It was Jeremiah’s responsibility to proclaim this message to Judah for decades, until the city of Jerusalem finally fell to the Babylonians in 587 B.C., but it was Habakkuk who first broke the story. He reduced the unthinkable to a vivid image everyone could picture. The people of Judah were like the fish of the sea, fair game for a fisherman to pull in with his hooks or catch in his dragnet. The Babylonian army was like a successful pagan fisherman worshiping the tools of his trade, living in luxury, and “destroying nations without mercy” (1:15-17). In contrast to the hapless fish, Habakkuk likens himself to a sentry in the watchtower, on the look out for God’s response. “What’s God going to say to my questions? I’m braced for the worst. I’ll climb to the lookout tower and scan the horizon. I’ll wait to see what God says, how he’ll answer my complaint” (2:1, the

Message). Habakkuk continued to deal with his “burden” by listening to God’s Word. The prophet knew that the destiny of all humankind depended on the truth of God. And what was true in Habakkuk’s day is still true today, our future does not depend on technology or science or economics or politics or medicine, but on the Word of the Lord.

At the center of Habakkuk’s burden is the Lord’s prescription on how to handle this revelation of judgment. If we share Habakkuk’s burden, and we do, we should pay attention to this spiritual direction. The Lord told the prophet to write it down, make it plain, and send it on. The prophet was given an enduring message (“write down the revelation”), an unambiguous message (“make it plain on tablets”), and a broadcast message (“so that a herald may run with it”). He was to do this because of the certainty and inevitability of God’s judgment: “For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay” (2:3). There are two horizons to this message of judgment. In the not-too-distant future loomed the invincible Babylonian army and in the far-distant future appeared God’s ultimate judgment. The more immediate, temporal judgment was intended to serve as a warning of God’s final, eternal judgment.

I imagine that no one likes to think about God’s judgment, but as the followers of the Lord Jesus, we, like Habakkuk, need to get it down, make it plain, and proclaim it. We must not interpret delay as a change of plans. The apostle Peter was emphatic on this point:

“But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt

in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.” 2 Peter 3:8-13

Habakkuk was able to embrace the message of judgment because of two fundamental truths. First he zeroed in on the extent and intensity of human depravity by delivering five taunting woes, and then he focused on the total sovereignty and absolute holiness of the Lord God. He used his skill as a poet to paint a vivid word-picture of evil. He captured the arrogance of people drunk on pride, intoxicated with wine, stoned on greed, and consumed by their will to dominate and exploit other people (2:4-5). The prophet’s five woes encompass the nature and scope of human evil. He painted a devastatingly bleak picture of economic and environmental exploitation, leading to violence and urban destruction (2:6-8). The search for Babylonian homeland security led to such “unjust gain” and “the ruin of many peoples,” that the stones and woodwork of their homes cried out against them (2:9-11). Their cities were built by bloodshed and the workplace was filled with “meaninglessness, emptiness, futility and frustration” (Prior, 252). But in spite of urban life’s moral chaos and vocational futility, Habakkuk had the faith to look forward to a destiny reserved for the faithful, “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord” (2:14; see Num 14:21; Isa 6:3). In contrast to the glory of God, the fourth woe exposed the shameful social practices of a hedonistic, self-indulgent, sexually obsessed culture. Even the animals were no longer safe (2:15-18). The prophet’s final thrust took aim at popular spirituality. Their gods were the product of their own ingenuity and imagination. They had placed their trust in what they created and looked to lifeless objects to give them life.

It was against this cacophony of horrific sounds and violent images of terror that Habakkuk redirected the reader’s focus and called for silence with a simple line of declaration, “But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (2:20; see Micah 1:2; Zephaniah 1:7). He embraced judgment for two reasons: the evil of humankind and the holiness of God. Having prayed out his pain, he now prays out his praise in the temple with orchestral accompaniment. He begins, “Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.” Against a litany of human evil, he offers a recital of God’s acts of redemption. The God of all creation, the Sovereign Lord of history, is mighty to save. He refers to Teman and Mount Paran, place names recalling

the Exodus and the conquest of the promised land (Deut 33:2; Judges 5:4-5). Such is the power and splendor of God, that plagues and pestilence, earthquakes and floods, are readily available for the administration of his judgment. What God has done in the past, God will do in the future. Habakkuk was confident that God in his wrath will remember mercy (3:2) and that when he judges the nations he will deliver his people and save his anointed one, just as he saved the Israelites from drowning in the Red Sea (3:12-15; Ex 14:21-29).

### **Live By Faith**

All of this, the tragic litany of evil and the recital of God's redemptive acts of power, left Habakkuk shaken to his core. "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled" (3:16). This is extreme spirituality, not in the foolish, fanatical, and egotistical sense that calls attention to itself, but in the sense of a down-to-earth, life-on-the-line total commitment to the seriousness of God's Word. Habakkuk was so far from going through the motions, debating theories, and arguing opinions that it is impossible for us to understand him unless we trust in the Word of God as he did. The mess of the human condition and the mystery and might of God's justice brought Habakkuk to the emotional and physical breaking point. The "burden" that the Lord had given him was almost too much for him to bear. There wasn't then and there isn't now a therapeutic approach adequate for this condition, nor a coping strategy sufficient for this situation. It would be difficult to underestimate the importance of Habakkuk's next move. If he had turned inward and tried to rely on his own strength, he would have failed. If he had placed his trust in circumstances, he would have been ruined.

We have a solid indication of how Habakkuk was going to respond even before we get to the end of his prophecy. At the start of his description of human evil, he drew a clear comparison between the self-reliant wicked and the God-dependent righteous: "he is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous will live by his faith" (2:4). It was this line that the apostle Paul used in *Romans* to capture the essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He wrote, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Rom 1:17; see Gal.3:11; Hebrews 10:38).

The only way Habakkuk could bear the burden that God had given him was to

embrace judgment and live by faith. This is exactly what he did. His conclusion is a powerful testimony to his faith in God's faithfulness.

“Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.

Though the fig tree does not bud  
and there are no grapes on the vines,  
though the olive crop fails  
and the fields produce no food,  
though there are no sheep in the pen  
and no cattle in the stalls,

“yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

The Sovereign Lord is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
he enables me to go on the heights.”

The closest parallel we have to Habakkuk's testimony in the New Testament is when the apostle Paul declared, “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

The only way to deal with our burden is to have faith in God's faithfulness. Both judgment and salvation are in God's hands. Remember the wise counsel that the apostle Paul gave, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Cor 10:12-13). If we place our trust in ourselves or in others, or in our circumstances, we are bound to fail, but if our faith is in God's faithfulness we will be able to stand up under the pressure and climb the heights.