

Lessons from Habakkuk

Trusting God's Goodness

After preaching about God's abiding presence amid life's adversities, a pastor was confronted by a woman who tearfully asked: "Pastor, where was God on the day when my only son died?" Reading a deep sorrow on her face the pastor kept silent then replied: "God was in the same place where He was on the day His only Son died to save us from the eternal death."

Like us, Habakkuk witnessed injustice, violence, and evil. Even worse, God appeared to be silent amid it all, though He did ask Habakkuk to trust in His promises.

The prophet did not live to see the fulfillment of those promises; yet, he learned to trust in them anyway. His book begins with a complaint to God but ends with one of the most beautiful songs in the Bible. Like Habakkuk, we must wait in faith until the time when the world will be "filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."

Perplexed Prophet

Read Habakkuk 1. What are the questions that the prophet asks of God? Though his situation is, of course, different from ours, how often do we find ourselves asking these types of questions?

Habakkuk is unique among prophets because he did not speak for God to the people but rather spoke to God about the people. The prophet begins his struggle to understand God's purposes with a cry of bewilderment: "How long, O Lord?" In the Bible, this question is typical of a lament (Ps. 13:1, Jer. 12:4). It implies a situation of crisis from which the speaker seeks deliverance.

The crisis about which Habakkuk calls for help is violence that permeated society. The original Hebrew word for "violence" is *hamas*, and it is used six times in Habakkuk's book. The term implies acts of injury, both physical and moral, inflicted on others (Gen. 6:11).

Being a prophet, Habakkuk knows well how much God loves justice and hates oppression; so, he wants to know why God allows injustice to continue. All around he notices violence and law-breaking, and it seems that the wicked triumphs over the righteous. Justice is being perverted by the powerful, as it was in the time of Amos (Amos 2:6-8), and as it so often is today.

God's answer reveals His future plans. The Lord will use the army of Babylon to punish the people. This announcement surprises the prophet. He did not anticipate that God would use such a ruthless army to discipline Judah. In verse 8 the Babylonian cavalry are compared to a leopard, wolf, and eagle—three predators whose speed and power bring violent death to their prey.

Babylon's ruthless arrogance acknowledges no accountability, seeks no repentance, offers no reparations. It violates the most fundamental order of created life. Habakkuk is told that Babylon's army will be used as a "rod of My [God's] anger" (Isa. 10:5, NKJV). The punishment will take place during Habakkuk's lifetime (Hab. 1:5). This whole situation raises even more difficult questions about divine justice.

How can we learn to trust in God's goodness and justice when the world seems so full of badness and injustice? What is our only recourse?

Living by Faith

In Habakkuk 1:12-17, God's answer to Habakkuk's questions poses an even more vexing question: can a righteous God use the wicked to punish those who are more righteous than they? Habakkuk's question in verse 17 had to do with divine justice.

Habakkuk was puzzled, not only by the degeneration of his own people but also by the certainty that his country would be judged by another nation, one worse. The prophet was well aware of Judah's sins but, by any standards, his people, particularly the righteous among them, were not as wicked as the pagan Babylonians.

Read Habakkuk 2:2-4. What hope is presented there?

Habakkuk 2:2-4 is one of the most important passages in the Bible. Verse 4, in particular, expresses the essence of the gospel, the foundation of the verse that arguably started the Protestant Reformation. Through faith in Jesus Christ we receive God's righteousness; we are credited with the righteousness of God Himself. His righteousness becomes ours. It is what is known as justification by faith.

Verse 4 is a summary statement of the way of salvation and of the biblical teaching about justification by faith. How did the New Testament writers use this verse? Rom. 1:17, Gal. 3:11, Heb. 10:38.

In the midst of all this turmoil and questions about evil, justice, and salvation, Habakkuk 2:4 presents a sharp contrast between the faithful and the proud. The conduct of each group determines its fate: the arrogant will fail while the righteous will live by faith. The original Hebrew word for faith ('emuna) is best rendered as "faithfulness," "constancy," and "dependability." While the one who lives by faith is not saved by his works, his works show that he lives by faith. His faith is revealed in his works and thus that person is promised life eternal.

For the Earth Shall Be Filled (Habakkuk 2)

God's answer to Habakkuk's question in Habakkuk 1:17, as recorded in chapter 2, continues in the form of a song that mocks the proud oppressor. No less than five woes (Hab. 2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19) affirm the message that Babylon's doom is sealed. The punishment on the enemy will be in accordance with the "measure for measure" principle. What the wicked do to their victims will, in the end, be done to them. They will reap what they sow, because God cannot be mocked by proud human beings (Gal. 6:7).

In contrast to the oppressor, who is in the end judged by God, the righteous have the promise of eternal life in Christ, regardless of what happens to them here in this life. In describing the faithful remnant at the time of the end, the book of Revelation presents the expression "the patience of the saints" (Rev. 14:12). Indeed, the righteous are persistent in their wait for divine intervention, even if they see it only at the Second Coming.

Read Hebrews 11:1-13. How do these verses help us as we wrestle, in our own context, with the same questions with which Habakkuk struggled?

God's ultimate answer to Habakkuk's questions was the affirmation of His abiding presence. Trust in God's presence and confidence in His judgment in spite of the appearances to the contrary; that is the message of Habakkuk's book, as well as the message of all biblical revelation. Prophetic faith is trust in the Lord and His unchanging character.

"The faith that strengthened Habakkuk and all the holy and the just in those days of deep trial was the same faith that sustains God's people today. In the darkest hours, under circumstances the most forbidding, the Christian believer may keep his soul stayed upon the source of all light and power. Day by day, through faith in God, his hope and courage may be renewed."—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, p. 386, 387.

Remembering God's Fame

Read Habakkuk 3. What is Habakkuk doing there, and why is that so important, especially given the tough circumstances and difficult questions he is facing?

Habakkuk expresses his acceptance of God's ways in a prayer set to music (Hab. 3:19). Being fully aware of God's power, he asks the Lord to remember His mercy when the judgment begins. The prophet reverently recalls reports of God's great acts in the past and is praying to Him to bring redemption now. He seems to stand between the times. With one eye he looks back to the Exodus event, while with the other he looks ahead to the day of the Lord. He longs for a display of God's power in his present situation.

The hymn from Habakkuk 3 poetically describes God's deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian bondage. What has happened at the time of the Exodus is a foreshadowing of the great judgment day. The godly should not be anxious about the day of the Lord, but they must wait, persevere, and rejoice in the hope that is theirs.

The hymn is also a celebration of the power, glory, and victorious nature of God. The Lord is described as sovereign over the whole earth. The revelation of His glory is comparable to the splendor of the sunrise (Hab. 3:4).

God judges the oppressive nations; yet, at the same time He brings about the redemption of His people in His "chariots of salvation" (Hab. 3:8). On the surface God's power is not always visible, but the person of faith knows that God is there, no matter what.

Habakkuk calls us to look expectantly for the Lord's salvation, when He will establish His righteousness on earth and fill the world with His glory. By singing praises to the Lord, the people of God encourage one another (Eph. 5:19-20, Col. 3:16) to meditate on God's past acts and to hope for the glorious future. Habakkuk's own example demonstrates how one can persevere by living with a vision.

Dwell upon God's past leading in your life. How does this help you to learn to trust Him and His goodness, no matter what the immediate future brings? Why is it always so important to look to the ultimate and eternal future that awaits us?

God Is Our Strength

"Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; . . . Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; he will make my feet like deer's feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills." (Hab. 3:17-19, NKJV). What is so good about

the prophet's attitude here? How can we cultivate such an attitude for ourselves? See also Phil. 4:11.

The closing words in Habakkuk's book (Hab. 3:16-19) express the prophet's response to the revelation of God's power and goodness. A fresh look on God's saving acts sparks Habakkuk's courage as he awaits the enemy attack. His fear stirs his innermost being as he waits for divine judgment to fall upon his nation. Invasion may result in the devastation of the fig and olive trees, so highly prized in Palestine along with the equally needed vines, grain, and cattle. But the prophet's staunch faith remains untouched because he has had a vision of the living Lord.

Based on his past experiences, Habakkuk knew of God's absolute faithfulness. That is why he resigned himself to God's present purposes (Hab. 3:16-19). In spite of all the unfavorable circumstances, the prophet is determined to place his trust in the Lord and in His goodness no matter how hopeless his situation appears.

Habakkuk waits in faithful trust, even though there are no immediate signs of salvation. He is a prophet who, through dialogue, taunts, and a hymn of praise, has instructed the faithful over the ages to develop a deeper living faith in the Redeemer. By his own example, he encourages the godly to dialogue with God, to test their loyalty to Him in harsh times, to develop hope in the Lord, and also to praise Him.

Habakkuk closes his book with a beautifully expressed attitude of faith: regardless of how hard life may become, one can find joy and strength in God. The underlying message of his book points to the need to wait patiently for God's salvation in a period of oppression that has no visible end. The theme of "waiting on the Lord" dominates Habakkuk's book. How especially relevant that theme should be for us, as Seventh-day Adventists—we whose very name expresses our faith in the coming of Jesus.

Further Study:

Read the following comments and discuss how they help us to understand better Habakkuk's messages.

"There is an answer to Habakkuk's question. It is an answer, not in terms of thought, but in terms of events. God's answer will happen, but it cannot be spelled out in words. The answer will surely come; 'if it seem[s] slow, wait for it.' True, the interim is hard to bear; the righteous one is horrified by what he sees. To this the great answer is given: 'The righteous shall live by his faith.' It is an answer, again not in terms of thought, but in terms of existence. Prophetic faith is trust in Him, in Whose presence stillness is a form of understanding."—Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 143.

"We must cherish and cultivate the faith of which prophets and apostles have testified—the faith that lays hold on the promises of God and waits for deliverance in His appointed time and way. The sure word of prophecy will meet its final fulfillment in the glorious advent of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as King of kings and Lord of lords. The time of waiting may seem long, the soul may be oppressed by discouraging circumstances, many in whom confidence has been placed may fall by the way; but with the prophet who endeavored to encourage Judah in a time of unparalleled apostasy, let us confidently declare, 'The Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him.'"—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 387, 388.