

THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Week One: How Long, O Lord? (Habakkuk 1:1-4)

Although it was written many centuries ago, the prophetic book of Habakkuk could almost have been written today. It concerns the struggles and feelings of a faithful believer who is living in the middle of a society devoted to selfishness and ungodliness. Many believers can thus identify with the prophet's personal feelings. As for God's answers to these concerns, on a literal level they apply only to the immediate situation of Habakkuk's day. But they have spiritual parallels that can be of great value to us in responding to the things that discourage and disturb us about the world today.

The prophet Habakkuk (1:1) lived in the late seventh century BC, and he probably wrote his book of prophecy a few years before 600 BC. In his lifetime, the once-great nation of Israel had been reduced to one kingdom in the south, with its territory mostly restricted to that of one tribe, Judah. For some generations, the priests and religious leaders had led the nation astray, and after the death of the reformer king Josiah in 609 BC, the nation experienced an unbroken line of foolish and ungodly kings who kept making things even worse.

The prophet was a faithful and sensitive man, who has again and again cried out for God to help (1:2). The violence, immorality, and deceit of his people were gravely demoralizing to Habakkuk, and he correctly knew that only God could really help him to get through it. When he asks, "how long, O Lord, must I call for help?", every Christian sensitive to the pain of others can sympathize.

Habakkuk is only human, of course, and so he is also disturbed for his own sake (1:3). He is making every effort to do what is right, and it is excruciating for him to see almost everyone else doing otherwise. There just seems to be no reason why someone trying so hard should have to live in the midst of so much sin.

Moreover, he is perceptive enough to realize that those with authority and privilege are going to do nothing to make things better (1:4). In every era, those with wealth and power are concerned with maintaining their own positions. If they sometimes do things that benefit others, it is for their own purposes, not out of genuine concern. Those who really care about others will get busy at once meeting some of the many needs around them, rather than trying to gain privilege or position, and then rationalizing it by talking about the good they will do once they obtain what they seek for themselves.

In the rest of the book, God answers Habakkuk's concerns by telling him about a surprising plan to use pagan Babylon to discipline Judah (1:5-11). The prophet finds this confusing too, and he asks God to explain how this could be appropriate (1:12-2:1). God then answers at greater length, explaining things from a broader viewpoint (2:2-20). Finally, in humility, Habakkuk offers a prayer expressing his devotion to God's greater wisdom and majesty (3:1-19).

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009

© 2009 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Week Two: Be Utterly Amazed (Habakkuk 1:5-6)

The faithful Habakkuk has poured out his spiritual anguish to God, expressing his distress about the rampant sin and folly he sees in God's people. He feels powerless to oppose it, and he knows that the authorities and experts have no intention of addressing the real problems. In response, God explains his plans, which are not at all what the prophet had anticipated.

God's answer begins with a well-known verse (1:5). We like the idea of God doing something 'amazing', since we assume that it will be something that will please us. When God tells us that he will do something that we could not even conceive, we again think that it must refer to something that will excite our fleshly natures, for that is too often our expectation of God.

But in saying these things here, God is in fact warning the prophet that his solution to the spiritual ills around him is going to shock the faithful Habakkuk. Sensitive and godly, Habakkuk sees how bad the sins around him have become. But even he is hoping that God will either stamp out these sins, or at least punish them. God is less interested in punishing sins, or even in preventing them, than he is in ensuring that his presence can remain among his people.

This is why God plans something on a much larger scale than the prophet would have expected (1:6). Babylon, which had recently defeated Assyria to become the greatest power of its day, will now turn its ruthless armies towards Judah. God must take such a drastic step because he realizes that the problem is not simply the volume, or even the blatant nature, of Judah's sins.

The people's hearts have become so focused on foolish, temporary things such as pleasure, wealth, and selfish ambition that these things have seduced them away from God. Even though they gladly call themselves God's people, in their hearts they are worshiping themselves and their desires, not God. The purpose of the coming Babylonian invasion is not punishment, but purification. The hearts of the people must be cleansed and purified.

Judah will be taken captive to Babylon, and will need to live in unfamiliar surroundings, amidst unfamiliar neighbors. They had drawn false comfort and false security from the temple, the priests, and other outward things that made them feel 'religious'. Now they will find it harder to worship God, and thus will no longer be able to take his presence for granted. Later on, a purified remnant will rebuild Judah.

This is a basic adjustment that we ought to make in our view of God. As humans, we can become fixated on punishment or retribution, but God is not that way. Whether it is ourselves or others who undergo God's discipline, it is unwise to see discipline as primarily a punishment for some sin. God's love and compassion are unlimited, and his righteousness is also unlimited. The need for discipline is simply the logical consequence of his own nature.

And so the prophet does indeed learn an amazing thing about God: that God's love and compassion are so great that he will do things that make us question him or become angry with him, if that is what we must have in order to keep our hearts humble and our minds open.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009 - © 2009 by Mark Garner
Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Week Three: Dreadful Discipline (Habakkuk 1:7-11)

Hearing Habakkuk's concerns about the sin and folly of God's people, God explained to him that he already had plans to deal with the situation. Yet it was not in a manner that the prophet would have expected or hoped for. God intends to use the pagan Babylonians as a means of meting out harsh discipline to his people, in the hope that they will realize how fragile their physical possessions are, so that they will give their hearts back to God. The dreadful nature of the coming discipline shows how important it is to seek God above all.

God will use the Babylonians for his own purposes, but the Babylonians are motivated solely by their own ruthless nature and their craving for violence (1:7-11). These verses depict them as nearly unstoppable by human means. In the minds of the Babylonians, they gained their victories and conquests through their own greatness. They worshiped idols, but in reality they worshiped themselves; they were, "guilty men, whose own strength is their god". To the other nations, they were invincible and terrifying.

Yet all of this was only in appearance. Like any earthly nation, Babylon stood by God's grace alone. God allowed Babylon to enjoy undeserved power and wealth only to keep it available for his own purposes. Their own affairs and agendas, like those of today's human nations and governments (even those that claim to belong to God) had no importance of their own. God's real purposes render trivial the affairs of the world; and a nation's outward success usually has no correlation with how pleasing it is to God.

This passage raises some questions; and in applying it, there is a common pitfall - since God disciplines Israel as a nation, many persons wrongly think that God still acts in the same way, holding nations and cultures accountable as groups. This misses the point of the New Covenant: "no longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Hebrews 8:11, quoting Jeremiah 31). God has always desired to know, to teach, and (when needed) to discipline us as individuals. He now can do this, and now does do this, through the blood of Christ. You and I, not "America" or any physical nation, are now God's 'Israel'.

Perhaps the reason that many so-called Christians foolishly ascribe national disasters and problems to God's "punishment" is because we resist the individual accountability that the New Covenant teaches us. In Christ it is unacceptable to blame our spiritual problems on our nation, or even on our church. As far as worldly success and prosperity, we are indeed limited by many things beyond our control. This world is neither fair nor just. But this is not true when it comes to our spiritual well-being, which is of far greater importance.

If God uses 'Babylonians' to bring discipline to our lives, he will address our spiritual needs on an individual level. This means that we each must take responsibility for our own spiritual growth. God desires to know each of us, and if anyone, anywhere, desires to know him, then God will give that person everything that he or she needs in order to do so.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009

© 2009 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Week Four: The Struggle To Understand (Habakkuk 1:12-2:1)

The faithful prophet Habakkuk has asked God to do something about the spiritual decay in Judah, and God has explained that he will send the Babylonians to ravage the land, though not as punishment, but as purification. Only in this way will the people will see how little their earthly possessions mean, compared with the blessing of belonging to God. The prophet understands this, but now we shall see that he is troubled by the means that God will use to bring this about.

Though Habakkuk is frustrated with the sins of Judah and the irresponsibility of its leaders, he cannot grasp how God would allow them to be disciplined by the pagan Babylonians, who seem far worse (1:12-13). He is aware that God cannot have fellowship with sin, and thus cannot see how it is even possible, much less desirable, for him to use Babylon as an integral part of his plans. But he has made an oversight, and it is an oversight that we also often make.

The very fact that God cannot have fellowship with sin puts us all in equal need of his grace. There is not a specific percentage or degree of sin at which God can no longer have fellowship with us – any sin at all brings that about. It makes no difference whether we believe, or whether we do some good things, for we can never stand in God's presence without grace. Under the Old Covenant, the Levitical sacrifices provided atonement, so that his presence could remain with the Israelites. So, when they wandered from God, his presence could not remain. Being God's people does not depend on words or even on morality: it depends on being forgiven of all sin.

The prophet also has a keen sense of the vulnerability of human beings (1:14-2:1). The imagery in these verses graphically illustrates how weak we can feel in the face of the world's spiritual, sensual, and physical assaults. Like fish in the sea, we are just not prepared for all the dangers that can face us; without God, we cannot last long without falling.

Habakkuk's insights are, in themselves, perceptive and correct. He accepts the need to trust completely in God, and he expects God to do the right thing. If he is missing something, it is that he cannot always know or guess what really matters in God's eyes. Just as we often do, he wished for God to do something to stop those around him from sinning. But God, in his far greater wisdom, knows that outward sins are only symptoms of deeper and more dangerous sins.

Therefore God has chosen to give the Judeans what they need, not what they want or even what his faithful prophet desires. Looking at Habakkuk, we really can find very little to criticize. If anything, he handles the situation far better than we usually do. Despite his great frustration with the sins around him, he has not taken it upon himself to punish or discipline sinners. He just wants to understand. God will answer him; and when we too seek God's grace and wisdom instead of barging ahead with our own agendas, then God will answer and bless us also.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009

© 2009 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Week Five: The Futile Strivings Of The Ungodly (Habakkuk 2:2-14)

Although Habakkuk understands God's plan to use the Babylonians to discipline and purify Judah, the faithful prophet also recoils at the thought of a nation of brutal unbelievers trampling over God's own people, no matter how sinful Judah has become. The prophet has wisely expressed his concern directly to God, who now gives him an extended response. The main point of God's answer is that the accomplishments and conquests of the worldly are inherently empty and temporary.

God first reminds the prophet of the certainty that God's will and God's Word are sovereign (2:2-3). When it seems otherwise – as indeed it does to all of us sometimes – it is because we do not have God's perspective. We focus too much on God's timing, and not enough on the certainty of God's promises or the wisdom of God's perspective.

There is also a sharp contrast, which we often overlook, between the lives of the godly and the lives of the worldly (2:4-5). Those who live for the things of this world, whether tangible or intangible, never have enough to be completely satisfied. Those who pursue power always seek more, those who yearn for fame or popularity always want more, and those who desire money always crave more. "But the righteous will live by his faith"; those with faith know that they have found all that they need in God.

God will not give us everything that we ask for or desire in this life, but he will make sure that we have everything that our souls need. Those who have the right perspective can thus be satisfied with whatever God has given them. They do not desperately hunt for more of the things of this life, for they know that God has already given them all they need and even more.

The inherent impossibility of being satisfied with earthly riches explains why so many of the ungodly do such harm to others (2:6-12). The world's worst villains never see themselves as evil, for in their own minds they are only seeking what they desire and deserve. Instead of being angry and frustrated that God does not punish them more quickly, we should learn from their sad experience. When we cater to fleshly desires – whether for tangible things or intangible, and regardless of whether we can 'build a case' that we deserve what we desire – we are only a step away from the same destructive cycle of unfulfilled desire that consumes so many of the worldly.

So, instead of seeking the false glories of this earth, we ought to seek the true glory of our Lord (2:13-14). The earth is indeed filled with the glory of God, and we need only to take our eyes off of worldly things long enough to see God's glory more clearly. Every day has fresh reminders of the temporary, fragile, perishable nature of this earth. Every day brings new reasons to trust in God, and not in the rich and powerful persons of this earth. But, like Habakkuk, we must be willing to look and listen. God will not try to out-shout, out-manipulate, or out-advertise the world. His gentle whisper contains all the wisdom and compassion that we need.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009

© 2009 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Week Six: Silence & Humility Before Our God (Habakkuk 2:14-20)

The real difference between the righteous and the ungodly is not their outward behavior, but their attitude towards God. The worldly disregard God and seek to fulfill their earthly desires. But even believers can use God as a pretext for seeking personal advantage or power. If we are not humble before our God, then it makes little difference what our outward lives are spent doing. Whenever we realize that God truly is in his holy temple, then we shall, as the prophet says, simply fall silent before his majesty.

The human habit of exploiting others for selfish advantage has always been displeasing to God (2:15-17). As the prophet's imagery suggests, humans often add deceit - pretending to be generous when they are really being manipulative - to the sin of exploitation. We do not approve of such behavior, yet in moments of spiritual weakness we sometimes envy the selfish and predatory. The world actually glorifies many forms of selfish ambition and ruthless competition, and indeed there are many of the world's prizes that cannot be gained in any other way. But the believer should not therefore rationalize or admire such behavior.

The blessings that really matter do not require us to compete for them or to seize them from others. There is more than enough grace in the blood of Jesus to satisfy the needs of everyone. There is more than enough wisdom in the Word of God to tell us the truth about anything that truly matters. We can all share in these and other spiritual blessings without limit, if only we are able to be humble before God and compassionate towards one another.

Another root problem (unfortunately shared by unbelievers and believers alike) is that of idolatry (2:18-19). Like Isaiah and other prophets, Habakkuk mocks the practice of creating an idol of wood or stone, and then worshiping the lifeless object made by our own hands. But what about our own idols? When we allow our emotional state to be determined by a sports team, when we allow our relationships with God's children to be affected by differences in trivial earthly loyalties, when we focus on material things or worldly privileges instead of spiritual blessings, then we are just as silly and just as idolatrous as the ancient worshipers of Baal or Molech.

The solution to these and other spiritual ills is not programs, slogans, sermons, or pat answers, but only the humble awareness of God's greatness (2:20). Our human attempts to solve our problems with our own power do sometimes 'work' in terms of outward results or temporary emotional satisfaction, but they still fall short in the ways that matter the most. Our hope and trust should be put in God alone. It is all right if we struggle to have faith in God, as long as we give him, not the world, all of the faith that we do have.

Even if we can only grasp God's wisdom and majesty in brief moments, these moments should be enough to teach us to 'be silent before him'; that is, the awareness of God's full glory should convince us that the answers to life's important questions will never be found in human experts or human methods. But God has enough of the things we really need to get all of us through this world, and to bless us spiritually in eternity.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009

© 2009 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Week Seven: Genuine Awe (Habakkuk 3:1-13)

When Habakkuk was discouraged about the state of affairs in the world, God explained a number of things to him. Everything in this world - its nations and its rulers, its material blessings, its comforts and pleasures - exists only by God's grace. The faithful prophet now realizes that his own concerns and his own preferences are unimportant when viewed from God's perspective. So now Habakkuk offers a prayer of humility, thankfulness, and praise.

Habakkuk has learned the importance of living in the awareness of God's presence (3:1-3a). Note that the notation 'Selah' (in the middle of verse 3) is usually understood as a suggestion that the reader or listener should pause for reflection. There is another 'Selah' in the middle of verse 9, and a final one after verse 13, which together give us a possible way of studying this passage. Indeed, the third chapter of Habakkuk is essentially a psalm, and thus can be approached with perspectives or expectations similar to those with which we study the book of Psalms.

The remembrance of God's mercy and of God's mighty power can certainly make a difference in the ways that we respond or react to situations around us. The prophet even tries to visualize God physically coming to the land. God's presence is always a reality; we need only to remind ourselves of God's presence for our daily activities to appear in a different light. Truly knowing God's presence does not produce fleshly excitement or selfish desires - it produces genuine awe, reverence, and humility.

Then too, we need only to pause from our fixation with worldly human affairs to realize all the signs of God's greatness that he has given us (3:3b-9a, followed by another 'Selah'). The prophet's tumultuous imagery reminds us that God has extraordinary power over everything we see and touch in our universe. When he wishes to give life, no earthly force can stop him. If he wishes to discipline or even to destroy, then nothing can resist him. Here too, when we begin to appreciate just how powerful God is, it can cure us of our dependence on clever methods, partisan loyalties, simplistic slogans, and other such platitudes.

God's power is most often expressed subtly through nature, but we ought never to forget that he can act decisively in human affairs, anytime that he chooses to (3:9b-13, followed once more by 'Selah'). Whenever God does not act as quickly as we expected him to act, we should trust him instead of becoming impatient. When we become restless, we have an unfortunate tendency to forge ahead with our own ideas instead of waiting for God's guidance.

Patience does not mean inaction. At any given moment, there are always a myriad of needs that we can meet without any drastic or unusual action. But our problem is that we become bored with performing the same acts of faithfulness each day. We get an itch to do something more exciting or glorious, and we erroneously think that this is "faith". We ought simply to leave the glory to God, and to heed the prophet's call to "be silent before him". We do not need the kinds of superficial feelings or things that the worldly call 'awesome' - what we do need is to have a genuine awe of God, and of God alone.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009

© 2009 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.

THE LORD IS IN HIS HOLY TEMPLE: THE PROPHETIC BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Week Eight: I Will Be Joyful In God (Habakkuk 3:14-19)

The book of Habakkuk comes to a remarkable conclusion. The prophet began with a desperate plea for God to cure the nation of its idolatry and other sins, only to be told that the ruthless Babylonians would invade Judah, in order to discipline the nation and purge the people of their selfish, fleshly desires. This made Habakkuk even more concerned, until God reminded him of some important spiritual points. Now, in Habakkuk's closing prayer, he rejoices in God despite having learned that things will turn out far differently from his own previous hopes.

The prophet has learned never again to forget the absolute majesty, wisdom, and power of God (3:14). God can always overpower any earthly opposition, and can always refute any earthly error. When he does not do so, it is always because God has made a deliberate choice, for reasons that we do not realize or understand. No matter how frustrating a situation is to us, God is always aware of it, and will always act if and when it is appropriate. If it seems inexplicable to us that God chooses to wait, then the defect in understanding is always ours, never God's.

Above all, the faithful Habakkuk has learned to rejoice in God in all circumstances (3:16-18). In the past, he has trembled and despaired because of the realization that the world and its problems are too overwhelming for even the most faithful believer to control. Now, he sees that this is actually a blessing. He cannot change the world, but he is not responsible for changing it; he is only responsible for putting his faith and hope in God.

Once, Habakkuk worried endlessly about whether God was going to bring about the things that the righteous prophet desired to see. But now, he rejoices in the assurance that God's will and wisdom are far greater than those of any human; indeed, greater than those of all of humanity.

Habakkuk thus emerges from a time of spiritual crisis with renewed joy and renewed strength (3:19). In his beautiful imagery of a graceful deer moving confidently across the highest, most rugged ground, he expresses the newly found peace in his soul. This peace has not come about because of a change in circumstances, nor has it happened because God provided the prophet with new blessings. Peace for the soul comes most certainly when we remind ourselves of the things that we knew all along about God himself.

Like this prophet, we have all lived through some troubled times. And like him, we often give in to terror or despair because we forget how quickly and drastically things can change. Likewise, we have all lived through some good times; and again we forget that they too are very temporary. Worrying about external circumstances and trying to control the course of events on this earth can never bring any real peace, and they certainly do not produce godly fruit.

But God's ways transcend the affairs of this world. The gospel meets needs in our souls that run far too deeply for any worldly force to meet them. The peace of God does not come from finding a church or a nation or even a home that has everything we desire. The peace of God comes from knowing that we have a God who sees all, knows all, and loves all.

- Mark Garner, Northland Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, 2009

© 2009 by Mark Garner - Congregations and individuals may make or print copies of these notes for home, class, or small group study, without further permission, provided that the author and congregation are credited. Any other use requires the permission of the author.