

Habakkuk's Next Question

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Preacher: Lee Roberts

[0 : 00] So last week we covered verses 5-11 of chapter 1 and we saw God's answers to Habakkuk's original four questions.

! Those answers were much different than what Habakkuk expected. God told Habakkuk that he was raising up the Chaldeans to execute his judgment on Judah. And God spent much of that section telling Habakkuk about just how terrible the Chaldean army treated the nations it conquered.

The most shocking news for Habakkuk was not that God planned to use another nation to punish Judah. That was nothing new. He'd done that in the past. But the most shocking news was that God planned to use the nation that was even worse than Judah to carry out his judgment on Judah.

Tonight we'll look at verses 12-17 as we finish out chapter 1 and we'll see Habakkuk's reaction to God's reply. And that reaction takes the form of more questions.

So let's go ahead and read verses 12-17 of Habakkuk chapter 1 now. Starting in verse 12 it says, He says, Before we dig deeper into the verses, here's a quick overview of the passage itself.

[2 : 10] The first complaint in these verses focused on the inactivity of God in the face of apparent triumph of evil in society. The second complaint concerns God's actions.

Not only do believers want God to do something about evil, they want the Lord to follow their own agenda a lot of the times too. Habakkuk was becoming more and more bold as he questioned God. He was cautious at the outset, but then he actually challenged God's intention to punish Judah by the means of the ruthless Chaldeans. He rephrases his first question that he asked earlier in the chapter by saying, Why do you tolerate a people more treacherous than Judah?

In verse 12, he struggles to accept what he's heard. Then in verse 13, he rephrases the question based upon the new information that he got from God in the previous verses.

Then in verses 14-16, he expands the question with the metaphor of a commercial fisherman. And then finally in verse 17, he pushes forward the question of God's toleration of the wicked.

[3 : 15] And we'll see the Lord's answers when we get into chapter 2 next week. The historical context of Habakkuk's concern is the prospect of the more wicked Babylonian rule in Jerusalem.

When Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptians at Carshemish, he took control of Jerusalem. And he retained Jehoakim as king, but he was really his vassal. And then when Jehoakim rebelled, Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city and began deporting the people to Babylon.

So as we dig deeper into the verses tonight, we're going to break the verses into only two sections. Habakkuk will compare the character of God with the character of the Babylonians.

So first, we will see the righteous God. So the righteous God is your first point tonight. That should be in your even number page stack.

So let's look at verses 12-14 again. He says, Habakkuk's question dealt with the nature of God.

[4 : 46] He said, Oh Lord, are you not from everlasting? And Habakkuk used the covenant name of God in his address. The I am who I am of Exodus 3-14 is the God who promised to be with his people.

And as God has been in the past, he will be in the future. And the covenant name indicated eternal faithfulness and it should invoke confident dependence from Habakkuk and from all of those who call upon the name of the Lord.

The Hebrew term there for everlasting focuses particularly on God's past actions in Israel's salvation history. His eternal promises to Abraham and David were at the heart of Israel's faith. Habakkuk approaches God as the covenant king, the Lord of his people, the one whose very name is a reminder of his active involvement with his people's situation.

And the question the prophet asked is not one of doubt, but it's equivalent to a strong assertion. When Habakkuk says, my God, he speaks not just as an individual, but he speaks as the representative of all the faithful in Israel.

[5 : 56] Habakkuk can claim on his own behalf and on behalf of all of those who are loyal to the Lord that the Lord is my God. There's a personal bond between them that cannot be ruptured.

God is also my holy one and holiness here points to God's absolute purity and righteousness. God won't adopt a course of conduct that involves turning back his commitment on his own.

And the thought that God will treat the righteous and the wicked alike has to be rejected. The prophet can be confident that the Lord who has promised life to his people will ensure that the promise is realized no matter how dark the circumstances become.

The holiness of God is associated with his transcendent sovereignty and power, and it's manifested in the past redemption of his people. Because of God's holy character, Habakkuk, on behalf of his fellow sufferers, cries out, we will not die.

The we points not only to the righteous who are oppressed by their own countrymen, but to all Israel who are being ill-treated by the Babylonians and who will be ill-treated by the Babylonians. We as a nation will not be utterly destroyed.

[7 : 08] God is merciful and he remembers his covenant. And the eternal and unchangeable God is Israel's God. He's committed to them and he won't cast them off completely.

In the last sentence of verse 12, we see that Habakkuk believes what God said in the answer to his first questions. Notice that Habakkuk says to God about the Babylonians, O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.

So how could the holy and everlasting God do such a thing? That's really what Habakkuk is asking there. Instead of reproof, Habakkuk knows that the Babylonians aim at the extinction of their victims.

People in our day might ask similar questions. We might hear it phrased, how could God set up a godless nation to punish a nation filled with Christian churches? But this was something of Habakkuk's dilemma.

Habakkuk saw that the Babylonians had been established by God to do this, and he knew that the Lord controlled history and worked his will among the nations. World history doesn't take place by chance according to the scriptures, and nor are human beings ever the sole causes of it.

[8 : 24] The scriptures are clear that God is involved in the course of events. Human actions result in particular events, that's true, but human actions are always accompanied by God's effective actions as he works out his own purposes.

Habakkuk refers to God by two different names in this verse. He again uses the covenant name for God at the start of the verse. Then he refers to God as Rock.

And O Rock there underlies the changeless stability and reliability of Israel's God. He's their upholder and he's their refuge. He's the sole source of strength, the supporter of all that is upheld. He's ordained and empowered the Babylonians to punish his people, but not to destroy them. He's ordained them to discipline and correct the nation he loves, but not to annihilate it.

And he will remember mercy. Habakkuk is confident of that. So that in their end, the punishment will lead to salvation of those whom God has chosen. And that is Habakkuk's hope.

[9 : 25] What the Lord has decreed is the punishment of his people because of their covenant breaking. And the justice of this is implicitly acknowledged. But Habakkuk is confident that the Lord will not step beyond what is just.

And therefore, that's why he has confidence in the future. And Habakkuk expands on the reason for his hope in the first part of verse 13. He says of God, Habakkuk stands on what he knows to be true.

The God who raised up the Babylonians is infinitely pure in character and unquestionably holy in all his ways. He's eternally separate from sin.

And his eyes there speak metaphorically of his omniscience and his abhorrence of evil. God is too pure in countenance to look on wickedness actively and to look inactively at wrongdoing.

So you cannot look at wrong confirms the previous statement and it prepares the way for Habakkuk to question God's providence. He's proclaiming nothing new, only repeating just a basic tenet of Israel's faith in the justice of God.

[10 : 42] For God to put up with wrong or perverseness, the distress that wicked men inflict on others, is to contradict God's own character. So knowing this, Habakkuk is perplexed.

God appears to him to be tolerating the wicked. And so that's why he says, how could God tolerate the wickedness of Babylon? He knows God is holy and cannot tolerate wrong.

But God did tolerate the unrighteousness and in fact he actually used the nation, this evil nation, to accomplish his sovereign purpose. So do you get a feel for why Habakkuk had a right to be confused at this point?

Look at the next part of verse 13 now and you see that confusion come out even more. He says, So Habakkuk would join with Asaph in saying, Why do you hold back your hand, your right hand, take it from the folds of your garments and destroy them?

That comes from Psalm 74 verse 11. So again the question is, how can God remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man that is more righteous than he?

[12 : 21] In the past God had swallowed up the wicked on behalf of Israel. Now God's people face the prospects of being swallowed up by their enemies. And Habakkuk may be saying that if the wicked Jews are punished by the Chaldeans, the righteous remnant then is going to suffer along with the masses that are guilty.

So do you hear some other questions implied in Habakkuk's questions here? He's implying questions like, Why does God tolerate the Babylonians who are far more wicked than God's own people?

How can he possibly use a nation to punish the elect? And surely the more wicked are chastising the less wicked. And so is that compatible then with divine fairness?

So his puzzlement grows out of two basic concerns. A devastation of Judah which he perceives to be disproportionate to the sin that is being punished. And then God's employment of an agent who is more wicked than those who are being chastised.

The prophets like Habakkuk saw that God works in history to accomplish his purpose, even using godless nations to accomplish what God designs. In the past, God used Assyria as the rod of his anger to chastise Judah in Isaiah's day.

[13 : 38] And he worked through Cyrus to deliver those who he exiled to Babylon. But those who only see the short term always miss the significance of the work of God.

And here Habakkuk, focusing on the short term, questioned how God could do such a thing. God appeared to be doing the opposite of what Habakkuk believed about God.

And the God who is too pure to look on evil tolerated the treacherousness and stood silent while the wicked swallowed up the righteous. Sometimes the silence of God can be explained by the people's sins and their failure to repent.

But that is not always true. Judah, of course, in that day could never be described as righteous. But in comparison to Babylon, Judah lived as a righteous nation.

Notice that Habakkuk used the metaphor of swallowing up to describe the wicked actions of Babylon. And that was a good description of the swiftness of the Babylonian army in overrunning other nations.

[14 : 44] And God appeared to watch silently as these atrocities occurred. So check out verse 14 now. Still talking to God, Habakkuk says, Habakkuk boldly blames God for bringing about the conditions under which the Babylonians can abuse their power.

So let's pause and think about a question there. Is Habakkuk correct that God brings about the conditions that allow the Babylonians to abuse that power? Yes, he absolutely is correct about that. If God wasn't in control of those conditions, he wouldn't be God. So can you sometimes identify with Habakkuk about being unable to understand what God is doing?

We won't get to it yet, but as we look at God's answers going through the rest of the book, you'll see some of the reasons why God does what he does. And we'll talk about that briefly in the conclusion tonight.

But the continuing problem of evil in the world and God's involvement in it raised theological concerns for Habakkuk. Habakkuk knew that the Lord is the sovereign of the universe.

[15 : 59] The Lord had made men like the fish of the sea and like crawling things without anyone to guide them. So Habakkuk is wondering if God has now forgotten his creatures. He's also wondering if the Babylonians had become so powerful that they now could exercise control over what God created.

Habakkuk's point seems to be that the people of the earth are like the fish of the sea, subject to the whims of people more powerful than they are. And when you think about crawling things, you think about things like ants and locusts and other swarming insects.

And those insects have no ruler and they stood defenseless against things more powerful than they are. And so this is a forceful picture then of the way other nations were helpless before the Babylonian armies.

The Bible never makes excuses for God's sovereignty and neither does the Bible shy away from showing that God is at work in things that are difficult for us to understand.

Habakkuk will get the answers to his questions, but he's going to have to wait a little while longer before he sees those answers. So far we've seen Habakkuk talk about the righteous God.

[17:13] And in the second section of the text, Habakkuk talks about the ruthless Gentiles. So the ruthless Gentiles. Verses 15 and 16 have another description of the typical Babylonian warrior's behavior.

And then verse 17 finishes chapter 1 with another question. So listen to verses 15 through 17 again. He says, The brutality of the Chaldeans also was part of Habakkuk's protest here.

The fish illustration of the preceding verse triggered Habakkuk's next charge. Each Chaldean comes after potential captives with the hook in his hand. Monuments from Mesopotamia document the custom of literally driving a hook through the lower lip or jaw of their captives.

And long lines of captives are seen with hooks through their lips as they're being hauled off to Babylon. And in a second picture of Chaldean brutality, Habakkuk pictures the Chaldeans as being dragged alone in a net.

And in one drawing from this period, the major Babylonian gods are depicted dragging a net in which their captives are squirming. The fishing apparatus mentioned by Habakkuk is symbolic of the Chaldean war machinery.

[19:08] Net refers to nets generally, including smaller hand nets used in both hunting and fishing. And drag net refers to a net which is weighted and sinks to the floor of the sea.

So just as the fisherman catches in his nets all that he wants, the great and powerful armies of the Babylonians sweep up all the nations before them, and none of those nations is able to evade their advance.

With the Chaldeans, this brutality was part of their strategic planning. The Chaldeans actually boasted of their ruthlessness. They gloated over the misery which they inflicted on others.

And the oppression would be made much worse by the sting of mockery. So that's why Habakkuk is wondering, how could God permit this? How could he employ such a vicious power to punish anyone, especially the nation that had his covenant people?

At the end of verse 15 and on into verse 16, Habakkuk describes how the typical Babylonian celebrates his conquest. Look at the end of verse 15 again.

[20:16] It says, So he rejoices and is glad. Do you remember seeing the term rejoice and is glad elsewhere? In the Bible? Those two verbs, rejoice and is glad, are often used in context of worship of God.

But here they depict the Babylonian celebration and praise of their own strength. The repetition of the similar verbs emphasizes the extent of their delight and the certainty of their victory.

And all this serves to increase the puzzlement that Habakkuk has. Their armies bring them success and they rejoice in that success. After all, that's what they were aiming for.

They were not just aiming for military success, but they wanted the resources that go to the conqueror. And there may even be a hint of fiendish gloating over those they have captured.

So look at verse 16 now. It says, Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnets, for by them he lives in luxury and his food is rich.

[21:23] Instead of thanking God for his conquest and prosperity, the ruthless Gentile idolizes and deifies his net and his dragnet. And these stand metaphorically for his weapons of war, military strength, the policies, his counsel, and his conduct.

So in other words, he worships and praises his own strength and he credits that strength as the means by which he gets what he wants. And so he actually gives the things that he owns the honor and glory that's due to God alone.

He's like a fisherman who offers sacrifices to his net after the fisherman has a good catch. So these expressions need to be understood figuratively, though.

There's no evidence that the Babylonians actually offered literal sacrifices or burnt incense to their military hardware. But there is evidence, of course, that they believed that their own strength was the source of their success.

The forms of the two verbs sacrifices and makes offerings are usually applied to idolatrous worship. And when they are used together, as they are here, they invariably involve pagan worship in a fixed formula of condemnation.

[22 : 38] Simply by his choice of words here, Habakkuk is condemning the Babylonian practice. The prophet pictures the Chaldeans worshipping that which brought them prosperity and temporal pleasure.

They sanctified brutality and they deified greed. They regarded whatever horrible actions might perpetuate their sensuous lifestyle as being the right thing to do.

In other words, they thought those horrible things were actually righteous because it gave them what they wanted. So that's why he's asking, how could the covenant God tolerate such perversity? Worship properly belongs to God alone, not to things made by man. And so that is why Habakkuk is also so confused here. And the end of verse 16 tells us why the typical Babylonian worships his weapons of war.

The reason the weapons of war are worshipped is stated in two parallel clauses. Habakkuk says, for by them he lives in luxury and his food is rich.

[23 : 39] So this means that all the military conquests gave the Babylonians a high standard of living. Another way to say this is that their nets enable them to live luxuriously and eat the best food.

So while they take others captive, they get all the benefits of the things that used to belong to the captives. So in effect, the net and the dragnets, the symbols for their machines of war, become their gods because in their minds, they supply the people of Babylon with the finest things that plundering the world could bring.

So that's why the Babylonian rejoices and shouts for joy because of his success. Then he worships the things that make him rich and successful. And think about that for a second.

We may not worship things like nets and dragnets or military machinery, but how prone are people today to worship whatever makes them rich and successful?

It's the same thing we see in any culture today. Just in case you haven't been counting, Habakkuk actually used the fishing metaphor to set up nine objections to the Babylonians' activities and God's toleration of them.

[24 : 53] The wicked fisherman, which symbolizes the Babylonian Empire, pulls up the more righteous with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet, he rejoices, he is glad, he sacrifices to his net, he makes offerings to his dragnet, he lives in luxury, and finally he enjoys the choicest food.

The first three objections concern the abuses of the fishermen. The fourth and fifth object to the happiness of the fishermen. The sixth and seventh object to his false worship.

And then the last two wonder about his high living. So in other words, Habakkuk is saying, the wicked seem to have it all. So these objections provoke Habakkuk to ask one more question to end chapter one.

Look at verse 17. That's where he says, Habakkuk is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever? Habakkuk expressed his concern for the relentlessness of the Chaldeans by the means of a rhetorical question here.

The picture of the Chaldean army here is that they're dumping out the prey they just captured in one conquest so that they have enough room in their nets to go forth and capture more people.

[26 : 14] In other words, before they've even finished getting rid of one set of captives, they go get another. So Habakkuk can hardly grasp the dimensions of this disaster. Not only individuals, but whole nations become victims of the Chaldeans' cruelty.

And he ended the fishing metaphor with another form of his original questions. And they can be paraphrased with, are you going to keep on tolerating this? And if so, how long?

And this is really the prime question of this book. The answer in chapter 2 will come from God and God's answer is going to be yes and for a while.

God is aware of all these issues and he's going to offer a lengthy perspective on justice and how it will be accomplished. When Habakkuk wrote these words originally, he had yet to find out that God would give him an explanation.

Instead, as he initially finished writing these words that we've looked at tonight, he was left wondering and of course he wondered both why and how long, just as we've talked about. [27 : 21] And as we will learn by going through the remainder of the book, Habakkuk's views of God were right, but his perspective was too limited. He had looked for the punishment of the wicked so that the prosperity of his people could be assured.

But God, who knows the end from the beginning, looked for the punishment of Habakkuk's people so that they could be restored to fellowship with God. So as we come to the end of chapter one now, Habakkuk has two alternatives.

He can either allow his doubts to be destructive or he can let them be constructive. He can use his doubts, struggles, and questions to turn from God and to renounce his faith.

Or he can keep his hold on God, trusting God for an answer in God's timing. So let's think about what we should learn from these verses. And the first thing we should learn is that God will do whatever it takes to turn his people back to him.

God will do whatever it takes to turn his people back to him. The ruthless Babylonians are only an intermediate solution to the problem of injustice.

[28 : 34] Even though they are God's agent against a corrupt Jerusalem, later in this book we'll see that the Babylonians also will be destroyed. The purpose of such political upheavals in scripture is to turn God's people back to God's ultimate purpose for his creation.

And that purpose ultimately is human faithfulness in relationships, living by the instruction of God's word and true worship of God. That's why we need to remember that God's first interest is not in our prosperity, or our political power.

He prefers to destroy us in the hope of eventually accomplishing his greater purpose than to see us prosper in political security while chasing after our own whims.

The history of God's people shows that God is not primarily committed to peace, security, and prosperity of his people. Think all the way back to the Garden of Eden.

God removed Adam and Eve from their security when they turned away from a trusting relationship with God. God's first concern for us is faithfulness, living by his word and true worship.

[29 : 43] And these daily human expressions of trust in God are more important to God than any fiscal prosperity or national prosperity we might have. God has a much more lasting plan than anything that happens here in our lifetime on earth.

God is first interested in restoring us to a right relationship with himself as a created and redeemed people. And without that reconciled relationship, earthly peace and security are just a facade.

God draws us into lives of faithfulness in relationships through the instruction of his word. The Holy Spirit tutors us in true worship and the suffering of the Babylonian occupations is just a dire example of God's radical commitment to his goals.

But Jesus' suffering on the cross is God's ultimate appeal to a world that's built on violence. God will stop at nothing in order to draw us near to himself and the way of peace that God offers.

When we look at passages like tonight's, Hebrews 12, 5 through 11 is a good passage to keep in mind when we are facing God's discipline. The writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 12, 5 through 11, And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as son?

[31 : 07] My sons do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives.

It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness.

For the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. So that's the first thing we should learn, that God will do whatever it takes to turn his people back to him.

The second thing we should learn is that when faith is a struggle, rely on what we know about God. When faith is a struggle, rely on what we know about God.

[32 : 32] All throughout history, we've seen the struggle of faith in a violent world and Habakkuk said that tonight in verse 112. Despite all of his complaining, he still said, we will not die at the end

of verse 12.

After God had finished telling Habakkuk about the coming attack on Jerusalem in verses 5-11, the prophet's reaction to this horrible news is twofold.

He protests and he expresses faith at the same time. In one sense, he can't believe what he's heard, but he still believes it in another sense.

It disturbs him terribly, but yet he understands and has faith that the people will endure through and beyond their defeat. Habakkuk has hope in the face of judgment because he has a history and a relationship of trust with God.

He says that it is my God who is everlasting who tells him about what is going to happen.

Habakkuk's relationship with God is personal. He has the benefit of an eternal perspective, even in the face of suffering punishment for the sins of those around him.

[33 : 42] He cannot understand why the whole city must suffer, but he knows from personal experience that God is good. He addressed him as my Holy One in verse 12.

And finally, he speaks to God with the name that reaches deep into Israel's history and also looks forward into the revelation of Christ. Remember, he referred to God as O Rock, and this name expresses a whole history of experiencing God's faithfulness and deliverance in the worst times. It also reveals an expansive tradition of worship from which Habakkuk, who is probably a temple musician, can draw. So the second thing we see is that when faith is a struggle, we need to rely on what we know about God.

And finally, the third thing we see here is how easily that people can fall into false worship. So people can easily fall into false worship.

Think about just the cultures that we have today and compare them to the cultures back in Habakkuk's time. Cultures center their life on the most obvious source of their strength and prosperity.

[34 : 53] Back in the day, when seagoing cultures were prominent, they have sea and storm gods. Agricultural cultures have grain gods. Hunting cultures have totems and spirits that they believe can control the animals.

And technological societies such as our own do not identify gods officially, but yet our society worships values that lead to greater control over life, things like wealth and information and military technology.

So Christians may find that an examination of their allegiances creates internal conflict when they're part of an affluent society. Habakkuk reveals the deeper causes of violence when he points to the worship of the net and he calls for a rigorous evaluation of any devotion to prosperity relative to our ultimate devotion to God.

So that leads us to a few questions for reflection for tonight. The first one is, what is God's discipline designed to achieve? What is God's discipline designed to achieve?

And then secondly, we see that the Babylonians abused their success, success. So what is the proper way to react to success? When we as Christians have success, how should we react to that success today?

[36 : 20] Habakkuk's faith, though shaken at times, ultimately was rewarded. And one day, all believers will know that the answer to Habakkuk's first question in this passage was a resounding yes.

When Habakkuk said, are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? The answer is yes. And that is why we'll see that as we go through the rest of the chapter, verse 112 is true.

Speaking to God, that is where Habakkuk said in full, are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. Let's close in prayer.

Father, we thank you again for the reminder that even though we may not see it at times, you are in control even when dire circumstances are happening.

Help us always remember that as we go through difficulties, you are working out to your processes and promises to deliver us and to make us more Christ-like.

[37 : 23] Help us have faith in you as we go through our struggles and be with us and help us react properly to our successes. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.