

Lessons on Prayer from Habakkuk, the Grappling Prophet

Introduction and Habakkuk's Prayer

The name "Habakkuk" means "to grapple or embrace", and my purpose in this article is to draw some lessons from the way Habakkuk "grappled" with God in prayer.

Habakkuk prophesied to the people of Judah probably towards the end of the 7th century BC, when the wicked king Jehoiakim was on the throne, shortly before the people were taken into exile by the Babylonians (otherwise known as the Chaldeans). The prophecy he was given is designated a "burden" from Jehovah (chapter 1:1): a term which usually introduces a message of judgment.

The spiritual life of the nation in Habakkuk's day was at a very low ebb: violence and iniquity were everywhere in Judah, and justice was nowhere to be seen (chapter 1:2-4). The prophet cries and cries to the Lord regarding the iniquity of the people: "O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save!" (chapter 1:2). How can God allow such wickedness to continue amongst His people? why doesn't He do something about it?

Jehovah's Reply and Habakkuk's Response

The Lord patiently hears the prophet's complaint and promises that He will, indeed, do something about it; and it will happen in his lifetime: chapter 1:5, "for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you". But the Lord's response to Habakkuk is not quite the answer to prayer that the prophet was expecting. In fact, God's reply bewilders the prophet. Rather than **revive** the people, the Lord is going to **judge** Judah for its sin, and He is going to use the Chaldeans to do it: chapter 1:6, "For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling-places that are not theirs". Now the Chaldeans were a nation of unheard-of cruelty and arrogance.

Habakkuk is stunned by what God has told him. Surely the Lord will not destroy His covenant people! The prophet reasons with the Lord on the basis of His promises and His unchangeably holy character: "**Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die**" (chapter 1:12); and again, "**Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity**: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?" (chapter 1:13). To use such an instrument of His judgment, a people even more wicked than Israel, is surely inconsistent with God's character. His argument is bold; how would God respond? In chapter 2:1, Habakkuk goes to his watchtower to await the Lord's reply.

The Lord's reply is in chapter 2 from verse 2 until the end of the chapter. God tells Habakkuk that the message He will give him is not for the prophet's instruction alone, nor even just for the people of his generation, but also for future generations to read: "And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables (tablets), that he may run that readeth it" (chapter 2:2).

God does not rebuke Habakkuk for his complaint; He does, however, tell him that He will accomplish His purposes **in His way** and **according to His own timing**: "For the vision is yet for an appointed

time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry” (chapter 2:3). God goes on to tell the prophet that, although Judah will indeed be punished for its sin, He will, in turn, punish the Chaldeans for their great arrogance and wickedness before God: for example, “Because thou (the Chaldean army) hast spoiled many nations, all the remnant of the people shall spoil thee” (chapter 2:8); this divine principle, that we reap the due consequences of our actions (if not always apparent in this life, most certainly in the life to come), is echoed in the New Testament, in the words of the apostle Paul, “whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Galatians 6:7). Justice will be seen to be done in the end.

In addition to assuring Habakkuk of the judgment that will ultimately fall on Babylon, the Lord also gives Habakkuk **three wonderful assurances** for faith to take hold of. **Firstly:** whatever happens to the nation of Israel, the Lord has **a godly remnant**, according to the election of grace, and **they will live because of their justifying faith in God:** chapter 2:4, “the just shall live by his faith.” **Secondly:** God’s ultimate plan is that **the whole earth**, not just the nation of Israel, **will acknowledge the glory of Jehovah:** chapter 2:14, “For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea”. **Thirdly: the fulfilment of all God’s will is absolutely certain**, because **He is the holy, sovereign Lord**, before Whom men should silently submit themselves, humbly acknowledging His divine right to rule: chapter 2:20, “But the LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him”.

Habakkuk’s Song of Victory

In chapter 3 we have the prophet’s final response in the form of a prayer set to music. At the beginning of the prayer, verse 2, Habakkuk confesses that he is afraid of what he has heard concerning God’s coming judgment of the nation: “O LORD I have heard thy speech, and was afraid”; and he asks the Lord, in His anger at the people’s sin, not to forget to be merciful: “O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make known; in wrath remember mercy”. In verses 3 to 5, the prophet is given **a vision of the awesome glory, power and justice of the Lord:** “His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. And his brightness was as the light; he had horns (rays) coming out of his hand: and there was the hiding of his power. Before him went the pestilence and burning coals went forth at his feet”. And then, from verses 6 to 15, as he reviews Israel’s history, Habakkuk recalls how Jehovah has always come for the help of His people: “Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, even for the salvation of thine anointed” (verse 13). The prophet cannot help but tremble at the thought of the coming judgment, verse 16: “When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice”; but, in words which are some of the most inspiring in all scripture, the prophet’s faith in the God who is his salvation overcomes all the difficulties, and he finally **bursts forth in victorious praise:** chapter 3:17-19, “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat (food); the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds’ feet, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places”. **Faith is victorious.** Habakkuk has grappled with God and His ways, and has come forth a **more than conqueror**.

Some Lessons for Us:

- 1) Habakkuk was not afraid to **argue with God**; but he argued scripturally, based on the attributes and promises of God. The scriptures are full of examples of godly men and women who reasoned and argued with God in prayer; the Psalmist reasoned “What profit is there in my blood, when I go down to the pit? Shall the dust praise thee? shall it declare thy truth?” (Psalm 30:9); Job said that, if he could find God, “(he) would order (his) cause before him, and fill (his) mouth with arguments” (Job 23:4); Jacob wrestled with the Angel of Jehovah at Peniel (Genesis 32:24-30); and Moses argued with God at the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32:9-13), using God’s covenant promise, and His perceived character amongst the heathen nations, to enforce his argument. So don’t just tell God **what you want Him to do**, tell Him **why you want Him to do it. God loves a good argument!**
- 2) Despite our best arguments, God may not answer us in the way that we expect Him to; but He will always answer us **in accordance with His will**, and His will is always best. In 1 John 5:14 we read, “if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us”; and even Jesus prayed, “nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). **A humble attitude before God, and a quiet acceptance of His will, whatever it may be, is a necessary partner of argumentative prayer.**
- 3) Habakkuk **looked for God’s reply to his prayer**: “I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me” (Habakkuk 2:1). Habakkuk expected God to not only **hear** his prayer, but to **answer it**: and he **looked** for the Lord’s reply. The Psalmist did the same: in Psalm 85:6 he prays, “Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?”, and then, in verse 8, he says, “I will hear what God the LORD will speak”. We should **listen out for God’s answers to our prayers**.
- 4) Whatever testings and trials we may be going through, or may be around the corner, we can rest secure in the knowledge that **our God is on the throne of the universe**, working all things for His glory and our ultimate good. The wicked will not always prosper; God’s believing people, however, are on the victory side: the Lord’s side. Jesus Christ came the first time to defeat sin and Satan on the cross, and He will most assuredly come again to finally destroy all His and our enemies and usher us, His blood-bought children, into the “new heavens and the new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (2 Peter 3:13). Therefore, Christian brothers and sisters, though in this life we may suffer the loss of all things temporal and physical, we are “more than conquerors”, in respect of things eternal and spiritual, “through him that loved us” (Romans 8:37). So we can sing **with confidence in our sovereign, unchangeably faithful God**, in the words of William Cowper, inspired by the final verses of Habakkuk, “Though vine nor fig-tree neither their wonted fruit should bear, though all the field should wither, nor flocks nor herds be there, yet God the same abiding, His praise shall tune my voice; for while in Him confiding, I cannot but rejoice” (from the hymn “Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings”, no. 96 in Christian Hymns). Amen.