

Christ in Prophecy

Prophecy 68: Habakkuk's Resolute Faith

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Opening

Tim Moore: Welcome to Christ in Prophecy! I'm Tim Moore, the Director and Senior Evangelist of Lamb & Lion Ministries.

This week we'll continue our series of programs sharing the presentations from our recent Streaming Conference focused on "Unshakeable Faith." Sometimes, our challenges can seem overwhelming. What are we to do when the storms of life rage?

Today, Nathan Jones will be considering how Habakkuk determined to exercise resolute faith—even when perplexed by all the Lord had revealed.

Part 1

Nathan Jones' Sermon on Habakkuk

Nathan Jones: Ian Rappaport went from an everyday guy to a marketing sensation overnight. During the 2014 Super Bowl, the biggest stage for advertising in American culture, a beer company took a calculated risk and based their entire ad campaign around one man who didn't even know he would be in a commercial. The plan was simple: take this man and ask if he was "up for whatever happened next." If he said yes, he would be taken on a series of staged and improbable scenarios, all filmed with secretly placed cameras to catch his reactions. If he said no, the entire night would be an expensive and embarrassing mistake.

Luckily for the company, Ian responded in the affirmative and so ended up surprised all night by beautiful and famous people. They showed up in limos and elevators and secret rooms, with llamas and DJs and games of ping pong with Arnold Schwarzenegger. Ian took each bizarre twist with a smile on his face and a readiness to jump into the craziness. In a situation that should have bred confusion, he had total ease and confidence.

Of course, these reactions weren't an accident. While Mr. Rappaport was truly unaware of the reason for his adventure, he had been carefully selected for that night. As part of a focus group, the advertisers had identified his personality and had a good sense of how he might react in unusual settings. He was chosen by the marketing gurus because they could safely predict the attitude he was sure to have. Ian would almost always be willing to do 'whatever' because of his temperament.

"I didn't know what was going on," he said. "Not the slightest clue. But I knew I just had to go with it. That's my personality and who I am. I live in the moment and have fun. I guess that's why I was picked to be this guy." And a few drinks probably didn't hurt, either!

However, life isn't like a commercial, and most of us aren't like Ian. We get hit with surprises, but our surprises aren't always fun and positive. A spouse serves divorce papers, a company

makes unexpected job cuts, a doctor makes the prognosis of cancer, or a child brings home a fiancé who will surely doom their future together. Such predicaments seldom make us feel like “living in the moment” and going with it. Instead, we are hit with confusion. “Why God are you doing...?” whatever, we cry out.

Scripture is filled with men who share our confusion in the midst of events and announcements. Job, a faithful man blessed immeasurably by God, was rocked to the core when his family and fortune were destroyed. The Old Testament records Job's and his friends' attempts to make sense of his tragedy as they engage in debates and questions.

And what about Joshua, asked to attack a city armed with nothing but a power-walking crowd of immigrants with some trumpets? Or Abraham, who was encouraged to try to have a baby with his ninety-year old wife? Or Joseph, as he was sold into slavery by his brothers? No doubt that each of these men and their families were lost in the moment, unsure of what to say or do.

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” says the Lord in Isaiah 55:8. Intellectually, we have no problem with that statement, but emotions don't always listen to reason. Confusion is a natural human sentiment when faced with our God's sometimes-incomprehensible plans.

So, when faced with plans or commands we just don't understand, how do we carry on? How do we have faith when we are confused by God?

Habakkuk, the eighth minor prophet in Scripture, gives us a great case study to see how to handle our confusion with God. This prophet was called to share a message from the Lord, but he also had an honest reaction to that message, a message that he found difficult and perplexing. The result is a conversation where we see both the prophet's mind and the Divine Author's heart, and consequently we learn a thing or two about how we have unshakeable faith when we are confused.

With most of the Minor Prophets, our knowledge of their life situation is speculative. We have to stitch together a few bits of information, plus some inferences from the text, to produce a fuzzy image of who the writer might have been. Habakkuk is no different; the details of his background are vague, and our concept of his story comes more from imagination than the text. However, we don't need facts of his life story to know certain things about the man, especially concerning his deep faith. Several indicators in the prophecy are enough to show us that Habakkuk was definitely a mature follower of God.

For example, in the book's opening verses, Habakkuk asks God “how long” before his prayers will receive an answer chapter 1, verses 2-4. “How long” indicates a history of repeated and fervent prayer, so we know Habakkuk was a man of faith. The nature of his prayer is in regard to justice for others, wanting the wicked punished and injustices cured. This shows that Habakkuk loved people and was heartbroken by hurt. He was in tune to God's ideals, and he hated to see those ideals violated. From the very start of his book then, we witness a man who exhibited a committed and powerful faith.

Further passages also show evidence of a deep faith. He addresses God as My God, My Holy One, My Rock, in 1:12, showing a personal relationship with the Lord. In other places, he shows familiarity with God's works in history, and he rejoices in the God of his salvation. This is a man who knew the Lord, who trusted Him, and who had great faith.

As one commentator summarizes: Through this extended dialogue with Yahweh... we hear Habakkuk's vibrant faith and deep humanity, learning and growing in relation to God. He asks healthy questions and is persistent in his questioning. He is historically grounded in the memory of Israel. He expresses a profound faith in song. His humanity and joy are a model and a challenge.

Such faith must have originated somewhere. Additional evidence in the text helps us make some educated guesses about this prophet's background that match up with what we already know about his character. The concluding chapter of the book offers perhaps our biggest clue. It is a poetic prayer that is also a song. Like the Psalms, the Old Testament's hymnbook, Habakkuk 3 includes technical musical terms such as "shigionoth" in 3:1, and "selah" 3:3. These terms indicate tunes, musical styles, and musical divisions. By treating his words as lyrics, Habakkuk reveals himself to be a Scriptural singer, song-writer, the Old Testament's equivalent of Chris Tomlin.

Habakkuk, though, isn't just an independent artist struggling to make ends meet. His ascription of the song to the "chief musician" in the final verse of the book, 3:19, causes us to think he likely served as a Temple prophet-musician, one of the official positions of service at the Temple. If this prophet's day job involved service at that holy location, then it is easy to draw some inferences about his daily focus and dedication to the Lord. The strong faith we see in his writings would have been an extension of the faith he lived every day serving in God's presence.

While Habakkuk's occupation would have strengthened his faith, his life in Jerusalem, where the Temple was located, would have tested it. Habakkuk ministered during a dark time in the nation of Judah. Contextually, we can determine that Habakkuk served somewhere between 630 to 605 BC, overlapping the reign of King Jehoiakim, one of the last kings of Judah and one of the worst. Jehoiakim's actions and policies, which we've seen in relation to other prophets, led to an oppressive spiritual climate for those who sincerely tried to worship Yahweh.

He killed the innocent who opposed him and refused to pay poor laborers, Jeremiah 22. And under his administration the prophets and priesthood were corrupted in adultery and abuse of authority, Jeremiah 23. The king sent assassins who killed the prophet Uriah for prophesying, as both Habakkuk and Jeremiah also did, that Jerusalem would fall in Jeremiah 26.

This difficult situation weighed heavily on Habakkuk. The struggle with the things he saw happening in the streets, and the courts, and the palace. Injustice and immorality were the norm, and it led to a crisis of faith for him. How could this be happening? Like many of the other prophets, theodicy, which is the problem of why a good God permits evil, was at the forefront of his mind.

Habakkuk's prayers poured out his heart to God: "How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?" It is a cry echoed in many places throughout Scripture, from the desperate pleadings of the psalmists to the voice of the martyrs in Revelation 6. The difference is that Habakkuk's questions are not just the righteous struggle of a God-fearing man; they are the occasion for God to provide a direct answer. Habakkuk's questions seem to initiate his call, since God responds and gives an answer that must be shared.

Habakkuk's rare privilege of dialogue with his Creator, though, is not satisfying. Rather than answers, he stumbles into more questions. God's solutions are complicated and confusing, something "that you would not believe, even if you were told" chapter 1, verse 5. It is a message bittersweet and strange, worthy of the title "burden" used to describe it in the opening verse of the book.

God uses this back-and-forth conversation with the confused musician as an occasion to share something deep and meaningful.

"How Long?"

The world around Habakkuk did not value the things that God values, and so Habakkuk begins this exchange as one who is offended. King Jehoiakim is not the only one who is abusing the system. The violations are widespread among the population, and they are not minor. Violence. Plundering. Strife. Contention. Habakkuk sees these, and he sees that the official remedies of law and justice are just not working.

"The law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds."

We may think of a number of modern parallels to this situation. For instance, as the Covid-19 pandemic began, groups like Antifa and BLM rioted across America burning cities for many weeks, and yet the city governments and courts failed to press charges and provide justice. Innocent citizens were assaulted and beaten, and yet their pleas for peace and order were ignored by their own legal system. The Mainstream Media turned a blind eye to their hate and actually came out in support of the lawlessness. Ancient Judah was just as corrupt, and the corruption wasn't limited to social issues. Civil and religious crime went unnoticed and unpunished.

Habakkuk plays the role of the distraught observer, knowing that change is beyond his power to effect. His sensitivities have not been dulled by this wickedness around him; instead they have been sharpened. He is more keenly aware of the abuses against God's Word than his countrymen are, and that knowledge is just pure agony to him.

So, he cries out, and his pleadings receive a divine response. "Be Utterly Astounded!" Habakkuk's social commentary had been about Judah, but God answers by shifting his focus.

"Look among the nations and watch, be utterly astonished! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you." (Habakkuk 1:5)

Instead of finding an internal remedy to social injustice, God points to an external solution. He reveals a plan to bring punishment upon the evildoers in Judean society by using, an army of evildoers, the terrible and dreadful Chaldeans!

Anyone who is familiar with the history of the Bible immediately knows about the Chaldeans, a.k.a. the Babylonians. Their rise to power and their eventual conquest of the nation of Judah is a foregone conclusion. To us, that statement is no more shocking than a Star Wars aficionado hearing yet again that Darth Vader is Luke Skywalker's father. Yet Habakkuk is like a man who has never heard about or seen a Star Wars movie. He is blown away by this new piece of information. The news, as God says, is utterly astonishing.

Part of Habakkuk's shock was tied to the low level of influence the Babylonians held in his time. The Babylonians were a surprising choice because they were not yet a regional superpower. For years, the leading nation in the Middle East had not been the Chaldeans; it had been the Assyrian Empire. Their cruel dominance had been felt by every nation in the region, from what is now modern-day Iran throughout the land of Egypt. The Assyrians had been unstoppable for decades. They were the ones who devastated the Northern Kingdom of Israel, scattering Judah's cousins in every direction, including six feet under.

Assyrian might had ruled this corner of the world with no substantial opposition. Yet, in a shockingly short amount of time, Assyria would fall to a new power. This fall had been revealed already in the prophetic book of Nahum, so a godly Levite like Habakkuk might not have been surprised to hear of their defeat. However, he would have been flabbergasted to think of the still-insignificant Babylon as the aggressor who would easily rise in power to chastise God's Chosen People.

The other part of Habakkuk's shock and astonishment came from God's surprising answer that He would punish the evil in Judah by using a nation that was even more evil. Rather than finding an internal remedy to social injustice, God planned the destruction of Judah's society. Instead of curing the patient by cutting out the cancer of evil, God was going to allow the patient to be killed and the eaten by a wild animal!

Well, God's description of the evil Babylonian force is poetic yet terrifying. This “bitter and hasty nation” chapter 1, verse 6, would sweep across the region, taking control of lands they had never before possessed. They are compared to leopards in reference to their speed. Their fierceness is likened to an evening wolf. As a speeding eagle ready to eat, the Babylonian army would swoop in for the kill. The ease with which the Babylonians would conquer is reminiscent of a child playing in the sand at the beach. Captives are gathered like sand and earthen mounds are heaped up to seize cities. The cities and countries of the Middle East are sandcastles being razed by a callous youth, and Judah is next to be flattened.

The Bible's progressive revelation regarding these world powers helps us remember that such changes do not happen by chance. It was by the hand of God that Assyria fell, and it would be by the hand of God that the Babylonians would rise up to conquer. It was a work that God would work in the days of Habakkuk, not a coincidence or accident. These revelations made God's answer to Habakkuk's first question of “How long?” even more confusing.

“Did I Hear You Correctly?”

As Habakkuk listens to this answer from God, he is awestruck and confused. The unanticipated response takes him by surprise. Certainly, this doesn't seem to answer his initial question.

“How long until you fix the injustice in our country, God?” Habakkuk asks.

“I'll smash Judah with the Chaldeans!” God replies without explanation.

Our musician trusts God implicitly, yet he struggles to make sense of this answer. What does God mean in this response? Habakkuk must now ask “Why?”

“Why do You look on those who deal treacherously and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?” he probes in 1:13.

If any situation warrants confusion, certainly this one does. God had a special relationship with the nation of Israel. They were His people, promised to Abraham, rescued from slavery in Egypt by Moses, settled in the Promised Land under Joshua, and ruled by the anointed King David. God has done amazing things for his people, and now he seems to be siding with the enemy! Habakkuk feels as betrayed as Conservatives did when Fox News turned on President Trump. His people seem to be in danger of falling under the judgment of an evil, pagan society to which God seemingly has no positive ties. Searching for confidence, he feebly protests, "We shall not die," but the musician's declaration rings a bit hollow.

He paints a picture of how he feels in the next few verses chapter 1, verses 14-17. Fishermen at sea, he says, use their hooks and nets to haul in and devour unsuspecting and defenseless fish. And now, Judah is the fish; Babylon is dragging in the nets of impending disaster; and God is the one who has granted a fishing license.

Of course, there is an irony here. That same "pure and righteous" group that Habakkuk contrasts to Babylon is the Jewish nation whom he had just excoriated in chapter one for their faithless acts. As bad as Judah's population may be, they can't be that bad, Habakkuk reasons. His own nation's flaws are seemingly minor in comparison to the ever-growing evil of the Babylonians that God had just described. So, he stands there in his confusion and pours out his heart, honest and baffled.

Like Moses at the burning bush, the prophet has the boldness to say more than "Yes, Sir" when he can't comprehend God's answer. Instead, he decides to ask God further. Like when Job questioned God, Habakkuk knows that the Lord may reply forcefully and with little or no explanation to his queries. But his desire to hear an answer to these questions is worth the risk. So, Habakkuk takes his place on the city walls and he waits hopefully for God to speak.

"Make It Plain"

To His praise, God provides a response. He is not harsh with Habakkuk, just determined to continue on the course He has laid out. Judah will fall to the Babylonians. But, that's not all. "Write the vision," God says, "and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it." (Habakkuk 2:2) The message will be made plain, whether the running is from messengers delivering it to the people quickly, or whether it is running after hearing the prophecy's words. Even though the fulfillment of this prophecy may take some time, "Don't worry" is what God is indicating, for "It will surely come."

Habakkuk 2:4 contains the most important part of God's reply, probably the most important statement of the entire book, and we will come back to it shortly. But the rest of God's message answers some important points. Though they conquer, Babylon will not be left unpunished. There is no free pass, no playing favorites. God will justly punish the Babylonians for their evil and their insatiable appetite for conquest.

Beginning in verse 5, Babylon's fate is laid out. It is presented as a taunt. Structurally, the material is divided into two sets of ten lines each. Each half concludes with a significant theological statement.

Verse 14 foretells, "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord."

Verse 20 commands, "But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silent before Him." Together they provide a set of five different woes proclaimed against the Chaldeans.

These woes bring to life a negative example of the Golden Rule, where the things Babylon has done unto others are now revisited upon her own people.

Such a declaration of woe against Judah's future oppressors would have helped Habakkuk feel a little better about the seeming injustice of this situation. At least God would hold the evil Babylonians accountable, even if His use of them to chastise Judah still seemed confusing.

Yet, the statement made immediately before this section of taunting and woe would have rung in Habakkuk's ears. Even as he heard Babylon's fate unfurl, the bigger point was God's statement about how to handle this entire message: "Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by faith," says God, chapter 2, verse 4.

The just shall live by his faith. That quote is of particular theological importance in the Bible. No less than three New Testament letters mention this passage: Romans 1, Galatians 3, and Hebrews 10. Commentator Warren Wiersbe notes, "The emphasis in Romans is on the just, in Galatians on how they should live, and in Hebrews on by faith. It takes three books to explain and apply just this one verse!"

Here, though, Habakkuk finds in this verse a way out of his confusion. While he had hoped for an explanation from God regarding the methods He chose or the timing He would use, instead God provides Habakkuk a path of action. Habakkuk doesn't have to understand or like God's plan, and he doesn't even need to question it, he just has to trust God and live by faith.

A Song of Faith.

In response to this revelation, Habakkuk takes the path God gives him in 2:4 and responds like any good musician would, by putting his thoughts and feelings to song. Chapter 3 is a powerful and beautiful work that compiles and applies the truth of his messages from God. In it we see several things that Habakkuk learned.

First, Habakkuk looks for a revival of God's works. As with the beginning of the book, he wants God to act and move. While chapter one was full of questions such as "How long?," here there is confident expectation that the Lord will act and move. "O Lord, revive your work in the midst of the years!" (Habakkuk 3:2)

Habakkuk is able to look back at history and see God's works spanning the centuries. He presents it in splendid terms, painting word pictures of God's glory and power and might. Rays flash from His hand, mountains see Him and tremble. All of nature, seas, rivers, hills, sky, are shown deferring to God. There is no question that the Lord has acted in the past, and Habakkuk trusts that He will do so again.

So, faith lesson number one, Habakkuk's first lesson is that even when we are confused, we should trust that God is at work.

Second, he sees God's heart. "You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for salvation with Your Anointed." God's purpose in these actions ultimately benefits His people. This is not God on a random warpath; it is a God the Warrior fighting for His chosen ones. The Anointed in this verse could either refer to Israel, in Exodus 19, the king of Israel, as in God's choice of Saul and David, or the expected righteous King, the Messiah. But no matter the reference, the actions of the Anointed show that God is fighting for a people He loves.

So, faith lesson number two, even when we are confused, Habakkuk discovers, we should trust that God cares for us.

Three. The third, Habakkuk remembers God's victories against evil. "When he comes up to the people, He will invade them with his troops" 3:16. He writes in terms that remind the reader of God's victory over Pharaoh during the Exodus, and he shares the language of victory found in places like Psalm 74. This remembrance helps give him confidence of God's power to overcome and victoriously establish justice and order.

So, faith lesson number three, even when we are confused, we should trust that God will achieve His purposes.

Habakkuk ends the song in chapter three no less confused than when he started. He knows God could act powerfully now, and He could solve Judah's problems without using the Babylonians. He also knows that God won't. God still intends to use what Habakkuk considers a strange course of action, a course that still does not make sense.

However, the path out of confusion presented in 2:4 gives Habakkuk opportunity to trust God anyway. He makes the conscious choice of faith despite not having all the answers he would like.

And so, his song concludes with this poignant expression of trust: "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; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there 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; He will make my feet like deer's feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills." (Habakkuk 3:16-19)

Habakkuk's display of faith despite confusion provides a powerful example for all of us to follow. His dialogue with God brings to light several faith lessons that can be applied when we ourselves are confused.

So, what lessons are there for you?

It is ironic that emotional honesty is sometimes frowned upon by Christians. For the man or woman going through a difficult time due to marital struggles, the death of a child, or the impossible financial mistake, the questions of "Why?" and "How long?" are too often frowned upon. They are mistaken as signs of a weak relationship with God.

Habakkuk reminds us that it is perfectly fine to suffer and be confused. We need not pretend everything is fine and put on a mask of tranquility when we are in turmoil. While we search for answers, we need to remember that our God is bigger than our questions and our problems. We need to trust that He is ultimately good even when we can't comprehend His plans. This faith isn't blind. It simply puts more confidence in the truth of Scripture than the pain of our own experience.

Habakkuk was able to experience the confusion, yet still trust Yahweh God. Faced with injustice and plans to deal with it that made little sense to him, Habakkuk still calls God "my God... my Holy One... O Rock." He is able to look beyond the murky present and live by faith.

We need to remember the lessons Habakkuk learned.

We should trust that God is at work. Jesus promises, “Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done,” Revelation 22. There is a Divine plan in motion. We may not see how our confusing events lead there, but each step takes us closer to the return of Jesus.

And we should trust that God cares for us. Jesus reminds us that, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life,” John 3:16. No matter what we are confused about, we can trust that God loves us deeply.

And finally, we should trust that God will achieve His purposes. Jesus has achieved victory already: “He forgave us all our sins... and having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross,” Colossians 2.

When we are confused, we need to remember that we are and will be victorious in Christ. So then, how do we have an unshakeable faith when perplexed? The answer: embrace the confusion, and then trust anyway.

Closing

Tim Moore: Thanks Nathan. You know, in this life we will have trouble. Like Peter, we may be sifted as wheat by Satan and his minions. But as the Lord told Habakkuk, the righteous will live by faith. We can have faith that is unshakeable—not because you and I are unshaken, or because our faith itself is immune from life’s storms—but because our faith is built on the unshakeable Rock uncut by human hands, Jesus Christ.

Until next week, this is Tim Moore for Lamb & Lion Ministries saying, Godspeed!