

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Ancient Guides for Troubled Times (studies in the Minor Prophets)

Faith for the Day When Life Falls Apart Study #1 (the prophecy of Habakkuk)

Introduction: “Minor” prophets? Hardly!

There is a collection of books in the Old Testament that are usually referred to as “Minor Prophets.” By anyone’s reckoning, this is an unfortunate way to refer to these books.

True, these twelve books are shorter than Isaiah and Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel. But, they have major messages and they speak with the same authority as the other prophets.

It has been my great benefit over the past decade to have had more exposure than most people ever get to the Minor Prophets. Here’s how it happened.

When Todd Havekost and I signed on to take a short-term Missions trip to Russia in 1999, we were given an assignment to teach the Minor Prophets in the Tatarstan village of Nizhnekamsk. I was flabbergasted - and petrified.

There was not, at that time, a section of the Bible I knew LESS well than the Minor Prophets. (I don’t know if Todd was in the same boat.)

So, I began to study these books, frantically at first, and then passionately. I fell head over heels in love with them.

They deal with the grand themes of life and relationships and God. They highlight God’s trustworthiness, His love, His justice, and His heart for the lost.

I had the privilege of going back to Russia in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2008 - and each time I was given the assignment to teach the Minor Prophets. I do, indeed, love the Minor Prophets!¹

And, having come to love them, I want you to have some exposure to these wonderful little books, too.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to look at four of the twelve Minor Prophets. And to kick start our studies, we are going to open to the book of Habakkuk (a guy who wins the prize for having the strangest sounding name of the bunch).

Habakkuk is one of my favorites of the bunch, for a variety of reasons. Chief among them is that his little three chapter book addresses the theme of *theodicy*. Great word - and an even more important concept.

Theodicy means “God’s justice.”² To have a conversation about theodicy is to discuss whether God’s rule is just. Does God know what He is doing?

I believe that the important questions in life boil down to theodicy.

When the diagnosis is cancer, the career hits the skids, the kids misbehave, the marriage turns sour, your enemy prospers, inflation soars - when hardships of any kind hit - the most natural questions to flood our minds take the form of theodicy:

- Why would a loving God allow THIS to happen?
- Why would an all-powerful God let THIS slip through?
- Why didn’t/won’t God DO something?

Have you ever asked yourself those questions?

¹ Displaying typical Slavic good sense, Russian Christians refer to these twelve books as the “small” prophets, not “minor” prophets.

² From the Greek “theos” (God) and dikei (justice).

Lots and lots of people have asked them, and many people get stuck there. They question whether God knows what in the world He is doing in the world.

If today, there is confusion regarding theodicy (even if you've only just learned the word!), then you're going to find help today. Habakkuk's prophecy meets the question of theodicy head on.

Background to the book of Habakkuk³

The prophet Habakkuk lived and wrote around 600 BC.⁴ This was long after the glory years of David and Solomon. In fact, by the time Habakkuk came on the scene, the nation of Israel had divided north and south into Israel and Judah, and the northern kingdom (Israel) had fallen to the Assyrians one hundred and twenty years previous.

During Habakkuk's lifetime, Judah, the southern kingdom, was in a sad spiritual state. Judah's King was Jehoiakim,⁵ a wicked King who followed his righteous father, Josiah, to the throne. Whereas Josiah led God's people in holiness, Jehoiakim blazed a trail to wickedness. Wickedness prevailed in Judah when Habakkuk sat down to write.

Now, his book is different than most of the other prophetic works. They usually address God's people, beginning with *"Thus saith the Lord."*

Not Habakkuk. He gives his message as a back and forth dialogue between himself and God. There is an actual exchange between the prophet and the Almighty. It gets intense, because Habakkuk often doesn't like what he hears the Lord telling him.

But Habakkuk never backs down. He keeps on pursuing the Lord and the answers to his questions. And in this, he lives up to his name.

In Hebrew, "habakkuk" comes from the word that means "embrace." And in this short book, the prophet embraces God. He is on a serious search for an answer to troubling questions. He refuses to let go of God until he is satisfied.

³ We don't know much about Habakkuk, the man. It is likely that he was a Levitical priest, but we're not even sure about that.

⁴ He was a contemporary of Jeremiah, Nahum and Zephaniah.

⁵ His name had been Eliakim, but Pharaoh Neco of Egypt changed it.

Habakkuk begins with a question most of us have asked at one time or another. The question? *"God, why are You so passive! Why won't you do something about the mess the world is in?"*

The Sometimes Troubling (seeming) PASSIVITY of God (1:1-11)

God, Do Something! (1:1-4)

The Prophet's confusion (v. 2)

[1] The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.

[2] How long, O LORD, will I call for help,

And You will not hear?

I cry out to You, "Violence!"

Yet You do not save."

That cry is as contemporary as this morning's Express-News. Haven't most of us here cried out for God to do something and been frustrated by His (seeming) passivity?

The way the prophet poses the question makes us think that he has been asking his question for a long time. Habakkuk has probably been begging God to do something for years.

He speaks of violence. He sees violence, not in neighboring nations, but on the city streets of Jerusalem.

As he prays, there is a great boldness about him. He speaks his mind to God. God doesn't seem to hear, so he shouts, *"There is violence, Lord!"*

He is praying for revival, for repentance on the part of the nation, for a return to the Lord. And nothing happens! God, it seems, is asleep at the wheel of His world.

In Jerusalem, the city of God's people, you can't walk down a street without feeling threatened. Jerusalem - the city where God chose for His Name and His Glory to dwell - is the home of crime and bloodshed and injustice and immorality.

Shopkeepers have to board up their shops at night. Homeowners are not secure. Daily, children are victimized. Women don't feel safe when they go out at night!

Habakkuk felt this evil deeply. It was torment for him to witness the moral mayhem occurring around him. He was deeply grieved and he let the Lord know about it.

The Prophet's suffering (vv. 3-4)

***[3] Why do You make me see iniquity,
And cause me to look on wickedness?
Yes, destruction and violence are before me;
Strife exists and contention arises.
[4] Therefore, the law is ignored
And justice is never upheld.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
Therefore justice comes out perverted.***

Habakkuk just doesn't understand how God could look on this situation and not rectify it? God's inactivity seems inconsistent with His justice.

The Law is ignored. People are spiritually cold. The wicked hold sway over the righteous.

As Habakkuk pours out his heart to God, he hears a throat-clearing, "**Ahem**" in the background. God is preparing to respond to His prophet's complaint. He isn't going to leave Habakkuk hanging.

Habakkuk, You Wouldn't Believe What I Am Going To Do! (1:5-11)

God Is Active (v. 5)

God assures Habakkuk (and us) that He is not as passive as it may appear. He is neither inactive nor is He unconcerned.

***[5] Look among the nations! Observe!
Be astonished! Wonder!
Because I am doing something in your days--
You would not believe if you were told."***

Have you ever tried to anticipate God's actions? I have - and I'm usually amazed and frustrated when I do. That is because, while faithful to do what He says He will do, He rarely does what I expect Him to do. God, as you'll remember, is VERY creative.

Habakkuk has been crying out to God about the wickedness in his land, praying for and expecting that God will intervene with revival.

Well, God is going to put a stop to Israel's wickedness - but not in the way Habakkuk was thinking.

There are a number of ways to put an end to sin. And God is not sending revival. He is sending judgment.

God's Use of the Chaldeans (vv. 6-11a)

His purpose for the Chaldeans (v. 6)

***[6] For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,
That fierce and impetuous people
Who march throughout the earth
To seize dwelling places which are not theirs.***

God's plan is to punish His people, the Jews, by sending the army of the Chaldeans (i.e. - the Babylonians) against them!

Now, in Habakkuk's day, the Babylonians were the big dogs. They were the most powerful empire on the planet.

They had conquered the former heavyweight empire of the world - the Assyrians - about twenty five years before Habakkuk sat down to write.⁶

And, while Babylon was an advanced civilization in many ways, with skilled mathematicians and astronomers, dazzling architecture and places of higher learning, they were also an idolatrous, immoral, and violent culture.

⁶ The well-known battle of Carchemish (625 BC) reduced Egypt to a second-rate power AND effectively ended the Assyrian Empire's stranglehold on the Ancient Near East.

Habakkuk knew all of this as he listened to God's plan. He keeps on listening as God describes the Chaldeans in more detail.

His description of the Chaldeans (vv. 7-11a)

***[7] They are dreaded and feared;
Their justice and authority originate with themselves.
[8] Their horses are swifter than leopards
And keener than wolves in the evening.
Their horsemen come galloping,
Their horsemen come from afar;
They fly like an eagle swooping down to devour.
[9] All of them come for violence.
Their horde of faces moves forward.
They collect captives like sand.
[10] They mock at kings
And rulers are a laughing matter to them.
They laugh at every fortress
And heap up rubble to capture it.
[11] Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on.
But they will be held guilty,
They whose strength is their god.***

Secular historians confirm what we read here.

The Babylonians evoked fear in all who saw them. Extremely arrogant, they were fierce in battle. God says that their horses are as swift as leopards; that horse and rider are as fierce as wolves and as ravenous for conquest as eagles. They are bent on violence, destruction, and conquest.

Like the Assyrians before them, the Babylonians' practice was to carry captive peoples to far off lands (an especially awful prospect for Jews whose national identity was so closely tied to the land of Palestine).

The final image of Babylon's might is of a tornado, tearing across the desert, unstoppable, devouring everything in its path.⁷

So, Habakkuk has his answer. He thought God wasn't doing anything. But God has pulled the curtain back and revealed that He was, in fact, doing something.

He was not being INactive. He was not at all passive. But, now, Habakkuk is more confused than ever!

The Sometimes Equally Troubling ACTIVITY of God (112--2:3)

Habakkuk's Perplexing Questions (1:12-17)

***[12] Are You not from everlasting,
O LORD, my God, my Holy One?
We will not die.
You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge;
And You, O Rock, have established them to correct.
[13] Your eyes are too pure to approve evil,
And You can not look on wickedness with favor.
Why do You look with favor
On those who deal treacherously?
Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up
Those more righteous than they?
[17] Will they therefore empty their net
And continually slay nations without sparing?***

It is not that Habakkuk doesn't understand. Oh, he understands all right! He just doesn't "get it."

How could God use a nation like the Chaldeans - ten times as wicked as Judah ever thought of being! - to discipline His people? Where is the sense in that?

It looks positively unjust. (The question of theodicy!) At first, when He looked at God, He saw *inactivity*, lack of care. Now, he sees *iniquity*!

I don't know about you, but given a choice, I'll take a passive God over a malevolent one any day!

Habakkuk envisions his people being taken away to captivity like fish. They are dragged away in nets. They are captured with hooks (We know that the Assyrians actually did this!).

⁷ At the very end of the prophet's description of the Babylonians, God says that He will judge them in the end. They are evil, and they will be punished.

He began his book with a complaint about the way God was choosing to rule His world. He wasn't intervening enough. Then, Habakkuk discovers that God is just about to intervene - and he doesn't like the intervention God has planned at all!

But, here Habakkuk lives up to his name - "The Embracer." He is not going to quit clinging to God. *"There is an apparent contradiction between God's nature and God's actions. OK. I'm going to hold on to God for all I'm worth. I'm going to listen and learn God's ways."*

Or, as he says it in chapter 2, verse 1:

Habakkuk's Decision to Wait on God (2:1)

***[2:1] I will stand on my guard post
And station myself on the rampart;
And I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me,
And how I may reply when I am reproved.***

If you, today, are confused by the ways of God, listen to Habakkuk. This is the reverent faith of the confused believer.

If the recent diagnosis has been exceptionally grave, if the job search has yielded no fruit, if the pain is chronic, unrelenting and debilitating, if the marriage is in shambles and doesn't appear to be getting any better despite all your best efforts, if the child you love desperately is rebelling, if the relationship you value most is disintegrating, listen to Habakkuk.

There is no demandingness in his voice. There is no railing. There is no fist-shaking. Instead, there is a patient willingness to wait, listen, and learn the ways of God.

What Habakkuk has been taught about the goodness of God throughout his life convinces him of that goodness. What He has seen of the Lord to this point in his own life further assures him of God's care. So, he is willing to hold off making sweeping accusations against God's character.

And his submissive posture shows how people like you and me are to approach God with our confusion - people who from time to time, are left scratching our heads, marveling at what God either does or does not do, allows or does not allow.

You've seen God's goodness, not only in the Bible's stories, but also in the details of your life. Not only have you seen a Savior hanging on a cross and risen from the dead, you've seen God provide for your needs, encourage you when you are down, answer prayer.

It is only right to give God the benefit of the doubt. Wait. Listen. Learn. EMBRACE God until you have a satisfied mind.

Habakkuk's question is a simple one: *"God, what are You doing?!"* God's answer is a straightforward: *"Trust Me. I know what I'm doing. I'm good. And I'm not following your script."*

God's Answer (2:2-5; 18-20)

The Justice of God

***[2] Then the LORD answered me and said, 'Record the vision
And inscribe it on tablets,
That the one who reads it may run.
[3] For the vision is yet for the appointed time;
It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail.
Though it tarries, wait for it;
For it will certainly come, it will not delay...
[18] What profit is the idol when its maker has carved it,
Or an image, a teacher of falsehood?
For its maker trusts in his own handiwork
When he fashions speechless idols.
[19] Woe to him who says to a piece of wood, 'Awake!
To a dumb stone, 'Arise!
And that is your teacher?
Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver,
And there is no breath at all inside it.
[20] But the LORD is in His holy temple.
Let all the earth be silent before Him.***

The bulk of Habakkuk's second chapter is written to assure the prophet - and us - that God will deal in justice. Here, God declares that the great Babylonian Empire will fall.

And fall she did in October of 539 BC, when she was overrun by the Medes and the Persians under Cyrus the Great. The Lord also makes clear why she will fall. It is her sin that will bring about her judgment.

Read through the second chapter of Habakkuk and you will see the uncompromising justice of God. Babylon violated God's laws and will pay the price. Her sins are recounted:

- She charged exorbitant loan rates (vv. 6-8).
- She trusted in the walls that surround the city rather than in the one true God (vv. 9-11).⁸
- She committed violence against the innocent (vv. 12-14).
- She allowed injustice to flourish unchecked (vv. 15-17).⁹
- She committed idolatry (vv. 18-20).¹⁰

All of this contributed to the inevitable downfall of Babylon.

To Habakkuk's question, "*Lord, how long will You allow the Chaldeans to trample nations?*," God gives a definite answer, "*Not that much longer. Her days are numbered.*"

So He has now partially answered Habakkuk's question. And He deals with the remainder of the prophet's question by posing His own question to Habakkuk and to all of us who sometimes are confused by His ways. The question is implied in the best known verse in this little book.

God draws a thick, dark line that divides humanity in two. There are, first of all, proud people.

The Trustworthiness of God (2:4-5)

The proud (vv. 4a, 5)

**[4a] Behold, as for the proud one,
His soul is not right within him...**

**[5] Furthermore, wine betrays the haughty man¹¹,
So that he does not stay at home.**

**He enlarges his appetite like Sheol,
And he is like death, never satisfied.
He also gathers to himself all nations
And collects to himself all peoples.**

This is the man or the woman who seeks a life independent of God. He has an insatiable thirst for "more." He is the captain of his own ship. Nobody - not even God, especially not God - tells him what to do.

And the proud person looks at the way life is working out and delivers a verdict: "GOOD" or "BAD." The proud person considers himself up to the task of judging God's actions and inactions as appropriate or not.

Note God gives a verdict on this man. He says that the soul of the proud person is "**not right within him.**"

On the other hand, there is the man, the woman, who lives by faith.

The faithful (v. 4b)

[4b] But the righteous will live by his faith.¹²

These two approaches to life - prideful independence and trusting reliance on God - are diametrically opposed.

⁸ Babylon's wall was 85 feet thick and eleven miles long.

⁹ Alexander the Great noted in his journal that he was shocked at the morals of Babylon (cf. Rev. 17)

¹⁰ God gets sarcastic!

¹¹ The Chaldeans were known to be heavy drinkers, but the wine referred to here is the intoxicating effect of power, conquest and wealth.

¹² Note the importance of these verses for New Testament theology; Gal. 3:11; Romans 1:17; Heb. 10:38; Heb 11:2; 2 Cor. 5:7; Romans 14:23. You might want to take a look at these passages and see how the New Testament authors develop the thought in their various writings.

We may flit from one to the other throughout the day, but at any given moment, we are either living a life of independent pride, or one of submissive, responsive, faith.

And here, God puts a choice before Habakkuk and all of us who come after him.

“Will you trust Me? Despite all that you see around you, will you trust Me? Will you remember My great faithfulnesses and mercies and promises - and trust Me?”

Confusion is understandable. Questioning can be helpful. But when it is all said and done, the faithful person embraces the idea that life is to be found in a trusting relationship with Almighty God.

Did Habakkuk ENJOY the explanation he was given about what God was going to do? No, he did not.

Yet, after the revelation from God he was faced with the choice of throwing a fist in God’s face, or bowing in trusting acceptance and worship.

Which will he do?

The third and last chapter of Habakkuk is a prayer. It is a prayer prayed in a certain style. The style is called, in Hebrew, *shigionoth*.

The Hebrew word means “to stagger” or “to reel to and fro.” The emotions are stirred in this kind of a prayer. It is prayed with great variety of vocal pitch. There is shouting in this prayer, and whispering. Tears accompany this prayer. Hands are raised high. Knees are bent. Faces touch the ground.

And at three key points during this prayer, our Bibles insert the word “Selah.” “Selah” calls for a pause. It invites us to stop and let the words sink in.¹³

The Prayer of Habakkuk the Prophet (3:1-19)

God’s Work Rehearsed (vv. 1-15)

***[2] LORD, I have heard the report about You and I fear.
O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years,
In the midst of the years make it known;
In wrath remember mercy.***

Habakkuk rehearses in this prayer what he understands is going to happen to his beloved homeland of Judah. It is a bitter pill to swallow.

Destruction is coming. Judgment is racing across the Fertile Crescent and will ruin Jerusalem and all of Judah.

Habakkuk envisions God going forth as a warrior. He remembers how God fought for Israel in the past - at the Exodus (v. 5), in the wilderness (v. 6), during the days of Joshua (v. 11), and at the time of the Judges. Now God will come as a warrior *against His people*.

The Chaldeans are God’s chosen instruments to bring discipline on Habakkuk’s and God’s people. He sees disaster and a scattering of his fellow Jews. He hears the victorious shout of his enemies. Wreckage is everywhere.

But the scene of Jerusalem’s destruction is not the last scene of the book of Habakkuk. We get to hear his response.

He knows that destruction is coming - and that there is not a thing he can do about it. He is like a car salesman watching a hailstorm rush toward his lot, or a soldier bracing for the attack of an enemy. It’s going to happen. We listen to words prompted by a vibrant, living faith.

A Faith-Full Response (vv. 16-19)

***[16] I heard and my inward parts trembled,
At the sound my lips quivered.
Decay enters my bones,
And in my place I tremble.
Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress,
For the people to arise who will invade us.***

¹³ This was to be used in corporate worship times.

*[17] Though the fig tree should not blossom,
 And there be no fruit on the vines,
 Though the yield of the olive should fail,
 And the fields produce no food,
 Though the flock should be cut off from the fold,
 And there be no cattle in the stalls
 [18] Yet I will exult in the LORD,
 I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
 [19] The Lord GOD is my strength,
 And He has made my feet like hinds' feet,
 And makes me walk on my high places.*

Habakkuk is given the test of the ages - and he passes with flying colors. These final words show us the submissive posture of a man who trusts God.

Habakkuk's was an agrarian culture. Everything centered around the produce of the land. Crops were all-important, as were the herds and flocks.

And all of this will be destroyed. The financial base of the nation will be wasted. The livelihood of his people will be ripped away.

And on the eve of all this happening, Habakkuk makes a faith-full commitment to worship.

He knows that God is more concerned with the formation of his soul than with his fleeting happiness; more interested in the quality of his faith than in the quantity of his goods.

And in one enormous step of faith, he chose worship over despair, worship over bitterness.

Conclusion:

What about you?

Have you suffered a devastating loss? Are you fearful of a soon-to-come catastrophe? Have you ever wondered would it take to derail you from a life of faith? What would have to happen to cause you to cease worshipping God?

You probably don't have fig trees or olive groves. You likely don't have flocks of sheep or stalls with cattle in them. Yet you DO have cars and houses and friends and a reputation and jobs and family and savings - and more.

Habakkuk knew that all he had was about to be ripped from him. Yet he continued to walk by faith. He refused to cease leading a life of submissive, trusting worship.

Would you, this morning, be willing to substitute the "stuff" of your life into the prayer of Habakkuk and commit to leading a life of submissive worship of God? Would you make a commitment to trust the Lord, today - NO MATTER WHAT?