

“Faith in God’s Purpose”

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 29:8-14 **Background Scriptures:** Habakkuk 1:5 – 2:5

Habakkuk 2:1–5 (NIV)

¹ *I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.* ² *Then the LORD replied: “Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.* ³ *For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.* ⁴ *“See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness—⁵ indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.*

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To describe the dialogue between Habakkuk and God.
- **Biblical Principle:** To trust God’s Word and plan no matter what.
- **Daily Application:** To remember that the timing of God’s response may not be as fast as we desire, but it is always perfect.

INTRODUCTION

“Can You Hear Me Now?”

No one likes spotty cell phone service. When a phone call seems to drop out, you ask, “Can you hear me now?” hoping that the other party will respond. In the early 2000s, a wireless network provider used that question as the foundation for a series of ubiquitous television commercials. The advertisements were intended to conjure a sense of trust from the audience toward this particular wireless network provider. The commercial implied there was no need to ask *that* question with *this* wireless provider.

Faced with the unjust behavior of Judah’s enemies, the prophet Habakkuk questioned the Lord. Habakkuk wondered whether the Lord heard his questions or if the Lord had left the conversation altogether. The prophet asked his own version of the question, “Can you hear me now?” The Lord responded, but would His answer be the message Habakkuk wanted to hear?

LESSON CONTEXT: The Man and His Times

The book of Habakkuk gives us some clues in the text to inform our educated guesses regarding the man and his times. Early in the book, the Lord promised to raise “the Chaldeans” (another name for the Babylonians) to punish the kingdom of Judah (Habakkuk 1:6). Using the then-future Babylonian exile of 586 B.C. as a historical marker, Habakkuk likely served sometime during the last decade of the seventh century B.C.; that would have been during the reign of evil King Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.).

Following the split of Israel into two kingdoms in about 931 B.C. (1 Kings 11:43–12:24), things went downhill for both. The kingdoms of “Israel” (10 tribes to the north) and “Judah” (2 tribes to the south) glared at each other for about 200 years until the Assyrians conquered and exiled the northern tribes in 722 B.C. (2 Kings 17). The southern kingdom of Judah narrowly escaped the same fate (18:13–19:36), even though they were also guilty of the same behavior that led to the destruction of their northern kin (17:18–20).

About a century later, the Babylonian Empire became the regional superpower after defeating the Assyrians and Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C. (Jeremiah 46:2). King Josiah of Judah unwisely interfered, contributing to the Babylonian victory; Josiah’s action also cost him his life (2 Chronicles 35:20–27). Just as Habakkuk 1:6 promised, Babylonian forces invaded Judah and overthrew its king (see 36:5–8).

For a few years, Judah’s kings served as vassals (subjects) to the Babylonians. However, this arrangement didn’t last. During the final year of the reign of King Zedekiah (586 B.C.), Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians after about a decade of conflict (see 2 Kings 25).

There was a series of deportations from Judah by the Babylonians—one each in 605, 594, and 586 B.C. Habakkuk likely served prior to the first of those, given the future tense of Habakkuk 1:6. This places Habakkuk as a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah. Both prophets received a warning that the people of Jerusalem would face dire consequences because of sinful behavior.

LESSON CONTEXT: The Book

An outline of the book of Habakkuk reveals a conversation between the prophet and the Lord. Two sections of the book consist of the prophet's questions to the Lord (Habakkuk 1:2–4; 1:12–2:1). Following each round of inquiry, the Lord responded (1:5–11; 2:2–20). In Habakkuk's first section of questioning, he expressed discontent that the Lord had seemingly not heard the prophet's call for correction of sin. In his complaint, the prophet's conclusion for this uncorrected state of affairs was that "the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails" (1:4). The Lord answered that He was going to use the Babylonians to punish Judah and Jerusalem (1:5–11).

This response left Habakkuk even more confused. In his lengthy reply, the prophet asked why the Lord would use a less-righteous nation to punish a more-righteous nation (Habakkuk 1:12–2:1). The lesson text picks up at the very end of Habakkuk's second complaint.

One Conversation: Habakkuk 2:1–3

Habakkuk 2:1 completes Habakkuk's second section of questioning that began at Habakkuk 1:12. In the verse before us, the prophet shifts from questioning the Lord to waiting for the Lord's response. When people call out to the Lord, the timing of His response is always perfect, but it is not always as fast as we desire. Habakkuk himself has been impatient in this regard (Habakkuk 1:2).

Habakkuk had no idea how long it would take—if ever—for the Lord to answer his second question (*see Hab. 1:13). But he wasn't willing merely to toss his prayer to Heaven and then go about his daily tasks. Instead, we see a determination to stay focused as he waited for a response concerning the things that were presently an enigma to the people. In this determined concentration, the prophet envisioned himself as a lookout who would *stand at his watch* as he performed the duty of a person responsible for sounding an early warning of something that was approaching.

The prophet saw himself as a watchman on the walls of Jerusalem, waiting for a message from God that he could share with the people. In ancient days, the watchmen were responsible to warn the city of approaching danger, and if they weren't faithful, their hands would be stained with the blood of the people who died (Ezek. 3:17–21; 33:1–3). It was a serious responsibility.

The Old Testament prophets were spiritual lookouts for the people they served. The prophets were to proclaim the arrival of the Lord's reign (example: Isaiah 52:8–10) and warn the people of the consequences of their disobedience (example: Ezekiel 3:16–17). In most cases, the people failed to heed the warning of these prophetic watchmen (example: Jeremiah 6:17). But if their failure to heed was due to the prophet's failure to warn, then the prophet would be accountable (Ezekiel 3:20).

The image of the watchman carries a spiritual lesson for us today. As God's people, we know that danger is approaching, and it's our responsibility to warn people to "flee from the coming wrath" (Matt. 3:7). If we don't share the Gospel with lost sinners, then their blood may be on our hands.

1. How did Habakkuk envision himself as he awaited the Lord's response to his questions? (Habakkuk 2:1)

What Do You Think?

In what ways can a believer "stand watch" to receive God's word?

Digging Deeper

How do the directives of Colossians 3:15–17 inform your answer in this regard?

The Lord replied to the prophet's complaints graciously and gave him the vision he needed. God's instruction was forthcoming, and He wanted a record kept of it; so He commissioned the prophet to write it down.

When prophets wrote messages from the Lord, they frequently did so on rolls (scrolls) of papyrus (see Isaiah 8:1; Jeremiah 36:2–4, 28). Ancient scrolls were fragile and could be burned (Jeremiah 36:22–23). However, the *tablets* commanded of Habakkuk were to be made of stone, similar to the "tables of stone" on which the law was divinely etched and given to Moses (Exodus 31:18; 32:15–16; Deuteronomy 4:13). The content of this vision was to be written upon clay tablets in large, legible letters. It was also to be plain, written so that anybody could read it, and it was to be public so that even somebody running past the tablets on display could get the message immediately.

2. What instructions did the Lord give Habakkuk when He responded to the prophet's complaints? (Habakkuk 2:2)

What Do You Think?

How could the practice of writing in a journal provide insights into the ways that God has answered your prayers?

Digging Deeper

What steps do you need to take to begin this practice?

God told Habakkuk that there was more waiting to come to see the fulfillment of *the vision at an appointed time*. God's promises would eventually be fulfilled, but not on a timetable that Habakkuk desired. The *end* in view, is the time at which the Chaldeans (Babylonians) will be destroyed.

We frequently become impatient when we have to wait. Rather than wait for God to act, we may take steps to expedite God's promises (examples: Genesis 16:1–4; see also Psalm 106:13). Rather than see God as longsuffering (see Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:8–9), we interpret God's silence as His refusal to act or hear (compare Lamentations 3:8, 44). Habakkuk needed to trust that the Lord would respond to wickedness in the Lord's own time and manner (see Nahum 1:3).

3. When would the vision from God come to fruition? (Habakkuk 2:3)

What Do You Think?

How can you practice patience regarding the Lord's answers to your prayers?

Digging Deeper

How might the Holy Spirit use other people in your life to help you develop patience?

Two People: Habakkuk 2:4–5

The Lord's message distinguishes two types of people – the proud and the just. The first type is the person *who is puffed up* with self-assured pride and arrogance. Such a perspective was indicative of Judah's enemies during this time. The military strength of the Babylonians was undeniable, leading them to count their power as a god (Habakkuk 1:11). Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar saw the expanse of the kingdom as the result of his power (see Daniel 4:28–30). Even as the Lord raised the Babylonians to conquer Judah, He acknowledged their pride (see Habakkuk 1:7). Similarly, when the unnamed king of Assyria looked out over his conquest, he proclaimed the strength of his hand (see Isaiah 10:12–13).

Even the kingdoms of Judah and Israel were guilty of arrogance (see Jeremiah 13:9; Hosea 5:4–5; 7:10; Amos 6:8). This behavior was part of the reason that enemies conquered them. The Lord detests those whose thoughts and behavior are grounded in pride (Proverbs 16:5). Such people will inevitably face dramatic consequences (see Leviticus 26:19; Luke 18:14).

This second half-verse (4b of today's lesson) offers an immediate contrast between two types of people. One type—the prideful—has just been discussed. The second type—*the righteous*—lives with an entirely different outlook, one of *faithfulness*. Their lives are grounded in righteousness. Such a person follows God's standards regarding their relationships with God and others. This person lives with integrity and without blame for wrongdoing (see Proverbs 20:7).

In a section of Hebrews that teaches the importance of the perseverance of faith, the author also quotes from a portion of Habakkuk 2:3: "For, 'In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.' And, 'But my righteous one will live by faith'" (Hebrews 10:37–38a). We live by faith because we can trust that God will also be faithful to His promises.

4. What two classes of people did God contrast as well as explain to Habakkuk? (Habakkuk 2:4)

What Do You Think?

In what ways can you live by faith in the upcoming week?

Digging Deeper

How does the Hall of Faith in Hebrews 11:1–12:3 inform your answer in this regard?

In a continuation of Habakkuk 2:4a, the Lord's message returns to the behavior of the *arrogant* person. Becoming drunk, on *wine*, might follow a successful military campaign (example: 1 Samuel 30:16). Babylon's military successes were intoxicating, leading the nation to desire more through military conquest. Babylon was incapable of staying at rest in her homelands (compare and contrast the behavior of the "Babylon" depicted in Revelation 14:8; 17:3–6; 18:3).

The Babylonians had an appetite for destruction as insatiable as *hell* itself. They would go on these military adventures for the sheer thrill of it, expanding their power through military conquest. As a planter gathers fruit at harvest, prideful rulers gather *all the nations* under their authority and conquest (compare Habakkuk 1:15–17). During these campaigns, enemies took captives into exile and slavery (see 2 Kings 15:29; 17:6; Jeremiah 50:33).

The Bible addresses the danger of pride and arrogance more than 200 times. By proportion, the greatest concentrations of these are found in the texts of Psalms and Proverbs. Arrogant, prideful people always incur God's disfavor (examples: Psalms 18:27; 31:23; Proverbs 15:25; 16:5).

However, such prideful behavior will not go unpunished. God will reverse selfish ambition. In response to the arrogant and destructive behavior of Judah's enemies, the Lord predicts punishment in terms of five sets of "woe" (Habakkuk 2:6–19, not in today's text). Although Judah was to suffer for its arrogant disobedience, its prideful and arrogant enemies would also experience a downfall equally devastating, if not more so (see Jeremiah 51:6–8).

5. How did God further explain the behavior of the proud? (Habakkuk 2:5)

CONCLUSION

Questioning God

Is it OK to question God's (apparent) actions or inactions? The dependable answer is, "It depends." We see God tolerating, even welcoming, questions in numerous places (examples: Judges 20:18; James 1:5; 4:2). One thing God does not tolerate, however, are inquiries that question His justice (see Job 40:8; Ezekiel 18:25–29; Jeremiah 2:29). The prophet Habakkuk came close to doing that.

When our suffering does not seem "fair," there are a lot of questions we might naturally ask. God was under no obligation to answer Habakkuk's questions, and He is not obligated to answer ours. Habakkuk needed faith to trust the Lord's plans, regardless of whether or not those plans made human sense.

God reminded Habakkuk that a life of faithfulness was most important. And the faith we are talking about isn't "blind faith"—a faith where one merely believes. Instead, the faith we are talking about is a

faith based on evidence. God has a long history of faithfulness to His promises. Upon that history is where our faith is based. Such faith trusts God's control in all circumstances. As a result, we can be secure in Him, regardless of whether or not we understand His plans.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, as we face life's hardships and want to question You, help us have the confidence of faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

The righteous lives by faith.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "**Sustaining Our Faith**" and tells of Jude's call for us to persevere our faith, and root ourselves in God's love for us as we pour that same love on those who have been hurt by our world. Study the Book of Jude.