

The Righteous One Will Live by His Faithfulness

Habakkuk 1:1-2:20

Key Verse: 2:4

“See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness”

Today we begin the study of Habakkuk which we will study in two lessons. Did you have any trouble to find Habakkuk? You know there's 39 books in the Old Testament, old has 3 letters, testament has 9 letters, 39 books in the Old Testament. They are divided 5, 12, 5, 5, 12. 5 books of the Torah, 12 history books, 5 poetic books, 5 major prophets, 12 minor prophets. The minor prophets were not minor in importance or stature but their books are just small, and all 12 were written on one scroll as a collection. So how do we remember them? There's a good mnemonic: **H**aving **J**esus **A**lways **O**ffers **J**oy **M**ightily. Ok that's the first six. **N**ever **H**aving **Z**eal **H**as **Z**ero **M**erits that's the last six. (**H**osea, **J**oel, **A**mos, **O**badiah, **J**onah, **M**icah, **N**ahum, **H**abakkuk, **Z**ephaniah, **H**aggai, **Z**echariah, **M**alachi).

Habakkuk is a little bit of a mystery. We don't find mention of him in any other book of the Bible so the only clues we can get about him are from this text. He is definitely the author, since the book says it twice (1:1, 3:1) and he was a prophet. He definitely lived in a time when Babylon was growing as a great military power but not yet a threat, since God says, “I am going to do something **IN YOUR DAYS...**” (1:5b). That means, he most likely lived at the end of the reign of Josiah and during the reign of his son Jehoiakim, making him a contemporary of Jeremiah and Zephaniah. Most likely he also lived to see the Babylonian invasion, as 3:16 mentions the nation “invading” them. His book is unique because it never addresses the people of Judah directly, like every other book of prophecy, but is a conversation, or more accurately the complaints and responses, between Habakkuk and God. This book would have really resonated with many of those in Judah trying to follow God in increasingly wicked times, wondering what God was doing. Habakkuk assured them that God is in control and would bring his justice in his time.¹

After the split of the kingdom of Israel, in the southern kingdom of Judah there were 20 kings. Of them 12 were evil, 8 were good and 4 of the good ones led the country into spiritual revival—returning to God and the Bible. Of the evil ones, Manasseh was the worst. He led the entire nation to do more evil than the nations they had driven out when they took over the land (2 Chr 33:1-10). As a result, God

¹ *ESV Study Bible*, Crossway, 2008. “Intro to Habakkuk” p 1719-1720.

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promised to send destruction, because he was not willing to forgive (2 Ki 22:16-17, 24:1-4, Jer 12:7-8). Josiah brought tremendous reforms to the country but as soon as he died, the people returned to all their evil ways under the rule of Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah (2 Chr 34-36). Jehoiakim killed and persecuted the prophets (Jer 26:20-23) and burned Jeremiah's prophecy in the fire (Jer 36). King Zedekiah had Jeremiah thrown into a well full of mud to starve to death (Jer 37-38). At the same time so many false prophets surrounded the kings and told them they would have victory and prosperity. The word of the Lord could not get through in such a time and telling the truth of God was a death sentence. Selfish kings lived in luxury by heavily taxing the people like slaves (Jer 22:13-17). Even Jeremiah lamented, **"You are always righteous, LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?"** (Jer 12:1)² This is the dark and seemingly hopeless background of the book of Habakkuk.

Habakkuk brings out two very difficult questions for every believer in every generation living by faith: **"Since God is good and all-powerful, why does he allow evil and injustice?"** And second, **"Since God is good and all-powerful, then why does he allow evil people to harm the good?"** The amount of injustice in the world today seems at times overwhelming. When people look at all the violence, destruction, injustice and the way that evil people seem to prosper, they feel that God cannot be good or that God cannot be all-powerful. Habakkuk assures us that God's justice will certainly come and will not delay. We may not see it in our time—some evil may never be judged in this world, for Jesus said if he pulled out the weeds the wheat may be uprooted with them (Mt 13:29). All we can do in such times is live by faith.

First, praying with a passion for God's law and justice (1:1-4).

Habakkuk begins his prayer, **"How long, LORD, must I call for help but you do not listen? Or cry out 'Violence!' but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife and conflict abounds"** (2-3). The words **"how long"** show that Habakkuk had been praying to God for a long time but had become frustrated because it seemed that God did not hear. Look at his biting words, **"you do not listen...you do not save...you make me look at injustice...you tolerate wrongdoing"** (2-3a). Habakkuk doesn't go around the issue looking for some polite way to address it, he is direct with God about what is

² In fact Jeremiah complains a lot more than Habakkuk so we can see the harsh effect of living in those times.

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in his heart. Here, we learn one of the most crucial aspects of faith: it's ok to have complaints about the world, about God, about the Bible, about the church, but the way to deal with them is in prayer to God. In the Bible Moses is one of my heroes because he never struggled with people but Moses only struggled with God in prayer. People came to him and constantly challenged him right to his face and what did he do every time? He didn't struggle with people but went and prayed to God (esp. Nu 11-17, except Nu 20:10). When he was challenged he fell with his face to the ground (Nu 14:5, 16:4, 16:22, 20:6). When he prayed he opened up to God very honestly asking **“What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? ...I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin”** (Nu 11:11-15).

In a sense Habakkuk indicts God and asks him to answer for his wrongs. Is it ok to complain to God like this? Professor of Theology at Whitworth University, Dr. Gerald Sittser, wrote the book “When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer: Insights to Keep You Praying with Greater Faith and Deeper Hope” 12 years after a tragic accident took the life of his wife, mother and 4 ½ year old daughter. In the chapter titled, *Can God Take Our Complaints?* he writes, “The Psalms put negative emotions into words. Half the Psalms contain complaints, usually directed toward God. The psalmist does not hesitate to wrestle with God, cry out to God, weep before God, even blame God for the misery and suffering. However high their view of God, the Hebrews believed that God was great and gracious enough to absorb this raw and reckless emotion and strong enough to withstand the hostility we pour on him. The Psalms show us that, when we approach God, we must speak the truth—about ourselves, about our circumstances, especially about our feelings. God doesn't seem to take offense. If anything, he invites such expression. He wants us to turn our emotion into a prayer, however nasty it might be...Moreover, God despises hypocrisy. Hypocrites give the appearance of something that is simply not true deep inside the heart...God can't do much with hypocrites until they are willing to admit the truth about themselves.”³ He goes on to say that venting to God after the accident brought great release and the Psalms gave him the language he needed to accuse and rail at God. All this led him to resolution and triumph, and he was challenged to write down his testimony in the

³ Gerald L. Sittser, *When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer* (Zondervan, 2003), p53-54,56.

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book “A Grace Disguised” which was translated into 20 languages and God used and is still using it to touch the lives of innumerable people.

At the same time, Habakkuk’s complaints are not empty venting. The darkness was real and demanded a response. **“Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds”** (3b). These sound like our times. Violence is so rampant, that every time I get a call from my son’s school, I’m a little anxious. We were all so moved to see so many young people recently passionately marching and speaking out, making their voices heard to end gun violence—Lord please work in our nation! We may feel like Habakkuk, that God for some inexplicable reason refuses to use his power to save. We’re looking at injustice, violence and destruction, strife and conflict and saying, “What is God doing? If I were God...I know what I would do!” Actually, our sense of justice is from God. Often what we are angry about, God is also angry about. So, do you take the often horrifying news of injustice to God and struggle with him in prayer? Or do you like so many get numb to injustice and just shrug your shoulders and say “That’s life in this fallen world”?

When Pope Francis visited the Philippines in 2015, he was welcomed to the University of Santo Tomas in Manila by a former street child, Glyzelle Palomar. She suddenly broke down and asked the Pope, “Many children get involved in drugs and prostitution. Why does God allow these things to happen to us? The children are not guilty of anything.” Francis, a champion for the poor and marginalized, was so moved that he embraced the 12 year old girl and then abandoned his prepared speech in English. Instead he spoke in his native language, Spanish saying, “She is the only one who has put forward a question for which there is no answer and she was not even able to express it in words but rather in tears.” He continued, “I invite each one of you to ask yourselves, 'Have I learned how to weep, how to cry when I see a hungry child, a child on the street who uses drugs, a homeless child, an abandoned child, an abused child, a child that society uses as a slave'?”⁴

In verse 4 he comes to the root of the issue, **“Therefore, the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.”** The word **“Therefore”** tells us that this is the point of his complaint. Because there is so much evil in the world therefore God’s word is paralyzed, it has no power to affect the hearts of people. We want to blame many

⁴ Tufft, Ben. “Pope Francis embraces girl after she asks: 'Why does God allow children to become prostitutes?'” The Independent. January 18, 2015.

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people for the injustices in the world, the 1%, the government, social classes, prejudices and the like and certainly they all will be held to account, but the real root cause of injustice in the world is that people refuse to listen to God because they want to do evil (Ro 1:18). Wicked people hem in the righteous on all sides with social pressure, persecution, threats, the media and then pervert or twist justice to fit their sinful lifestyle. Habakkuk's complaints are not self-righteous. It is a holy sense of justice that is all too often missing in our society today. We say we believe in justice and righteousness but often are too comfortable with sin. Let me ask you, are you upset that God's name is so dishonored in our society today? Are you as disturbed at the way the Bible, the Church and Christ are derided in society as you are about social injustices? Are you upset with the sinful perversions of God's law that are everywhere in our society, on the internet, on TV, or have you become comfortable with them? Let's learn to struggle with God in prayer over these things, and God willing, find answers and appropriate actions.

Second, praying to understand and accept God's will (1:5-17).

Well, if Habakkuk's prayer was shocking, God's response was more shocking. Look at verse 5, **“Look at the nations and watch—and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”** God was already raising up the Babylonians like a mighty wind in the desert that comes out of nowhere and picks up everything in its path, carrying them far away. Amazingly, through prayer he was opened up to mysteries of how God is working that he could not even see. Sometimes our prayer moves God to action, but more often prayer is the means by which we find out what God is already doing, conform to his will and get in step with the Spirit (Gal 5:16, 26).

However, this was not the answer that Habakkuk was expecting and he grappled to understand God's will which seemed to be at odds with his character. Look at verses 12-13, **“LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, you will never die⁵. You, LORD, have appointed them to execute judgment; you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too**

⁵ The difference in translations here stems from which source text we refer to. The Masoretic Text (ancient Hebrew) which is now the more generally respected text or the Septuagint (ancient Greek translation of OT) which was preserved by the church and for centuries considered the authoritative source. However the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls found a commentary on Habakkuk that agreed with the MT. If it is “we will not die” then it means eternal holy God I know that we will not die in the judgment you have ordained. If it is “you will not die” it is an affirmation of “Are you not from everlasting?” Either way makes no difference to the point of the whole statement as both are true regardless. For more insight: <https://claudemariottini.com/2010/08/26/who-will-never-die-god-or-us/> “Who Will Never Die God or Us?” Claude Mariottini, Professor of Old Testament, Northern Baptist Seminary

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pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?” Notice here that he is not challenging God or challenging God’s decision but seeking to understand the inscrutable will of God. Look at the way that he addresses God, “LORD” (Yah-weh, יהוה), “My God” (’ě-lō-hay, אֱלֹהֵי), “My Holy One” (qə-dō-šî, קִדְּוֵי), “My Rock” (wə-šūr, וְצוּר), there’s a deep intimacy expressed in this praise of God, in which he names God five times. Habakkuk accepted that the LORD God had appointed them to judge the nation. Yet, he knew that God cannot tolerate wrongdoing or approve of evil. So then, how could God condone wicked people swallowing up those more righteous? He compared idolatrous Babylon to a fisherman pulling up all the helpless fish of the world and asked “**is this wickedness going to continue forever?**” (14-17).

We cannot always know how or why God does what he does but that doesn’t mean that we give up or lose faith, we must pray expecting God’s answer. 2:1 says, **“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.”** What is beautiful here is that Habakkuk expected an answer that would solve the matter in his heart, which he believed he had failed to understand. Have you ever faced a seemingly impossible contradiction in God, a situation that should not be possible as a believer, a lack of answer from God about something you were sure was God’s will? How do we deal with that? Doubt and difficult questions are not bad things, if we respond to doubt with faith. Habakkuk posted himself like a sentry searching intently in prayer and God’s word for God’s answer. To wrestle with God like this we must first have the attitude of Habakkuk: I know my eternal God whom I love and respect absolutely (1:12) is absolutely good and absolutely just and absolutely loving (1:13), I’m going to struggle with this until I understand how (2:1). I can testify that if you wrestle like this with one thing, praying about it, meditating on it over and over again for a week, a month, whatever it takes, it will take you to a place of deeper faith and conviction. God always has a perfect will, we just can’t see it yet.

Third, the righteous person will live by his faithfulness by faith (2:2-20).

The answer to whether it’s ok to question God and struggle with him is answered powerfully in chapter 2. God doesn’t just answer but gives him a revelation that he wants proclaimed to the whole nation. Imagine it, our prayer unlocks the revelations of God and the hidden things that he wants to declare to his people—actually it happens each week as messengers and shepherds wrestle with

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God and his word. Though Habakkuk struggled that God did not judge the Babylonians for their greater sin, God assured him that his justice would prevail at the appointed time. **“Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.”**

Verse 4 says, **“See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.”** Some of you may have the word “faith” in your Bible instead of “faithfulness,” so which is it? It’s both.⁶ Actually, faithfulness (firmness, steadfastness) requires faith and faith causes us to become faithful. In verse 4, the faithfulness of the righteous person is contrasted with the arrogant nature of the wicked Babylonians, whose strength was their god (1:11). The wicked would be judged, but the righteous person would live by being faithful to God and his covenant. Therefore, in the midst of his judgment of the wicked nation, God offers them assurance that those who are faithful will be spared and will live (Gen 18:25). In contrast, five serious woes are pronounced on those who use wicked means to prosper in the world in the end these things would be their own downfall (5-19).

However, in the broader context to remain faithful in such circumstances they needed an unwavering trust in God—that is faith. Judgment DID come, exactly when God said it would through the prophet Jeremiah: after 70 years by the Medes and Persians (Jer 25:11-14). But it didn’t come right away. To be faithful while the wicked defeated them and to believe God’s promise would be fulfilled after their lifetime required a struggle to trust God (3:16-19, Eze 37:1-14). In fact, for the righteous person to **“live by his faithfulness”** required an intense battle to live by faith. For this reason the Holy Spirit led Paul and the author of Hebrew to quote this verse in relation to the battle to trust that we are righteous by faith alone that is unseen and not by works that can be seen (Ro 1:17; Ga 3:11; Heb 10:38). Roman 1:17 says, **“by faith from first to last”** or more properly, **“from faith to faith”**. That is moment, by moment, by moment, live by faith not what you see in yourself or feel.

⁶ Tresham, Aaron. “PAUL’S USE OF HABAKKUK 2:4 IN ROMANS 1:17 AND GALATIANS 3:11.” Especially p138. http://www.academia.edu/5886101/Pauls_Use_of_Habakkuk_2_4_in_Romans_1_17_and_Galatians_3_11 The conclusion is that if there were no reference to this verse in the NT we would accept “faithfulness” as the obvious grammatical-historical exegesis in the context of how to live and avoid judgment in the old covenant. However, faithfulness requires faith, which was necessary to struggle to believe the promise and remain faithful in the circumstances. Through the Holy Spirit Paul applied this verse to Romans and Galatians in the new covenant, where there was a similar struggle to firmly believe by faith though the evidence would lead them to doubt that they were saved, but he didn’t apply it literally. Rather, by the Spirit it was given a new meaning not intended by the original but which informs us of God’s full meaning in his words later to be revealed in the new covenant.

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Faith is everything. John said, **“And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith”** (1 Jn 5:4 ESV). Jesus constantly challenged and rebuked his disciples to grow in faith (Mk 4:40, Mk 11:22, Mk 16:14, Mt 17:20, et.al.). He challenged them to trust absolutely in God and his control of all things, that all things were possible for the one who believes (Mk 11:22-24). That faith was the cure for anxiety and the means to seek God and not the material world (Mt 6:33). So, actually the broader meaning of this verse is, **“The righteous person will live by his faithfulness”** by faith or by firmly having faith to the end.

I believe that each of us faces a point when we must decide conclusively if we are going to live by faith faithfully to the end or live by our human reason. For some, it is deciding to marry by faith. “Living by faith was a good when it was theoretical, but now I’m faced with a decision that will affect the rest of my life. Do I really trust God with my future?” For some it is choosing their career or how they will live their life after college. “Serving God wholeheartedly in college was ok, but now I have a mortgage and kids. Do I really trust God with my future?” Personally, I found a stumbling block when I considered my future security. When I was encouraged to go to seminary and pray to be part of the pastoral staff, I really wondered if this was God’s direction. But God has been revealing to me more and more that he wants to use me in this way. However, I found that I was very fearful about the future and wondered if this would be a secure career choice, how would I provide for my family? I found that I was on the edge of a precipice, I had to make a choice from which I could not return and in which I placed my families’ lives entirely in the hands of God. God was challenging me, “are you going to trust in what is logical and reasonable, or are you going to believe that I am God, that I am in control of all things? Can you trust me that I’m totally in control of the future and that I will take care of you no matter what happens?” I realized that central to the issue is who do we really believe God is? To live by faith we must believe God is God. Until we are faced with such a decision to live by faith and not by sight, God is an idea, and faith is theoretical. But when it will affect our life in real ways and we must make a leap, we must decide to trust God and put our lives completely in his hands. Some people’s decision of faith seems illogical and we might wonder if that was really God’s direction, but they decided to live by faith, and it is beautiful to God. The righteous person who decides to live their life by faith in God, he will never abandon.

In this passage we’ve grappled with some difficult issues and many are beyond the scope of this message. Many of us are bothered by the increasing wickedness we see around us. We are burning with righteous anger that God whom we love is so dishonored in the world. There are no easy answers, we must go and

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wrestle with God like Habakkuk and find our own assurance. But let's remember God's promises **"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea"** (14). And **"The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him"** (20). We already know the end of the story. God is on his throne, he is in control and he has told us that he **WILL** have final victory. Therefore, we don't need to worry. We can live by faith when we keep our eyes firmly, steadfastly, fixed on him moment by moment by faith.