

Six Devotional Thoughts from Habakkuk

Day One: "Honest Assessment"

Habakkuk 1:1-4

Background to Habakkuk's story (at least my limited understanding of it): The Assyrians have occupied the northern section of Israel. Around 612 BC the Babylonians (also called the Chaldeans) start flexing their muscles and begin to push south toward Jerusalem to take over the territory we know today as Israel. The Egyptians become allies with Assyria and provide resistance to the Babylonians and keep them from moving toward Jerusalem. In 605 the Egyptians get crushed at Carchemish near the Euphrates River, and they retreat. It becomes obvious that the Babylonians are going to be able to move toward Jerusalem and overpower it.

Habakkuk is a Jew and is watching (or hearing about) all that is taking place. At the same time he has watched his Jewish culture fall apart; the Jewish people have turned away from God's sacred scriptures. Instead of peace-makers they have become violent. Instead of engaging in civil dialogue they have become contentious, name-callers, finger-pointers, full of strife, bickering and antagonistic. The legal system has become corrupt. The wicked and powerful become more wicked and powerful. Everything seems broken and Habakkuk wonders how long God will tolerate such injustice.

Background to our story: Life's circumstances sometimes take over certain territories in our life. They keep us from moving toward our "Jerusalem," what we believe to be the core of who we are. Eventually the battles without become the battles within.

It becomes easy to turn away from God's sacred scriptures. Internal peace is replaced with hurt and thoughts of violence in the world, and violence toward one's self. Civil dialogue becomes difficult because solutions don't work, promising outcomes disappear like a morning mist. The lack of hope produces strife, bickering, depression and futility. The systems of life seem grossly distorted and God seems absent. Everything seems broken and we wonder how long God will tolerate such injustice, or worse, is there something that God is not tolerating in us.

Prayer: Oh God, please hear our prayer. We long to be intimate with you; to know you and for you to know us. And to know us, you must know our confusion, anger, waning trust and crushed hope. You must know how pain kidnaps peace and how discouragement robs us of grace. You have to know the exhaustion that comes with a marathon of unanswered questions and unending signposts of failed solutions. So there it is God. What do You do with that? What do we do with that? At times it feels like we don't know You very well. Maybe knowing You better begins with honestly telling you about ourselves. So please help us in our honest self-assessment and confession. And then help us to somehow see You in the midst of it all. Specifically today, Lord, be with my son Justin. Keep him close to You. Whether he feels it or not, hold him in Your hands. Whether he knows it or not, guide his every step. And give him a fresh drink of Your Peace. Amen

Day Two: "Solutions Are Worse Than the Problems"

Habakkuk 1:12-13

The Perceived Solution:

As was said yesterday, Habakkuk complained of the violence and injustice of his people. They had turned away from God's word. Habakkuk believed that God's answer for these problems was that the Babylonians were coming to conquer the land. And in fact they did. Seven years after the Babylonians defeated the Egyptians at Carchemesh, they attacked Jerusalem (598 BC). They were very ruthless in their destruction. They devoured land and people. Habakkuk described them as people who worshiped their own strength, were bent on violence, ruthless and impetuous. They were feared and dreaded; a law to themselves. They devour like vultures and gather prisoners like sand. In 586 BC they attacked Jerusalem again. This time they devastated most of the city and countryside, and destroyed the temple.

Habakkuk's new complaint is that the solution to the problem seems worse than the original problem. The Babylonians are horrific, evil and idolatrous. It seems so unjust that the unrighteous would be punished by people who were even more unrighteous (Habakkuk 1:13).

Corollary:

Sometimes, when things are bad, and I don't think they can get worse, they do. Sometimes solutions that I thought would help, actually make matters worse. Sometimes medical interventions have had unintended consequences. Far too frequently well-meaning pastors, friends or in-laws can say or do things that make matters worse. (Aren't these uplifting devotional thoughts? Hang in there. This is only Day 2. The good stuff is yet to come.)

Prayer: Oh Lord and Savior, thank you for abiding with us, and making us a temple for your dwelling. Just like the Babylonians destroyed the Jewish temple, sometimes it feels like our experiences have destroyed us and left a brokenness in which You could never dwell. Please show us how that is not true; that we are your temple, and that your Spirit has taken up residence within us. The stones can crumble and the walls fall, but your Spirit was never contained in walls anyway. We have often tried to repair the walls and sometimes our efforts have left us even more broken and crumbled. However, we are your children because you say we are your children. We are your temple because you say we are your temple, regardless of our feelings of inadequacy or insufficiency. Specifically today, Lord, be with my son Justin. Keep him close to You. Whether he feels it or not, hold him in Your hands. Whether he knows it or not, guide his every step. And give him a fresh drink of Your Peace. Amen

Day Three: "The Watch Tower"

Habakkuk 2:1

Anticipation:

At the end of Habakkuk's complaint concerning the abhorrent behavior of his people, the terrible wickedness of the Babylonian conquerors, and his frustration over the Lord's delay, he states that he will await God's response. He says that he is going to his watch tower, and there he "will look to see what [God] will say to me." I am intrigued by that statement. Usually we see what God will do, or hear what God will say. However, Habakkuk says that he wants to *see* what God will *say*. I believe this ties into a deep conviction of the Hebrew people concerning the word of God. God *spoke* and the world came into existence. God *said*, "Let there be light" and there was light. God's word is both a creative force and a sustaining force. God's word causes things to come to pass. So Habakkuk watches to see what God's word will do.

I often find myself in a watch tower. I have registered my complaints, confessed my hopelessness, and voiced my frustrations to God (or to the wind, or to the surf or to the ceiling of a darkened room in the middle of the night). Sometimes it feels like there is nothing left but to stand in a watch tower and wait. Will I be teased by another promise? Exhausted by an endless wait? Or oppressed by a deafening silence? Habakkuk stands in the watch tower. He is ready. He believes God *will* speak, that God *does* respond, and God *will* reply. He is pregnant with anticipation and looks to see what God will say.

Prayer: Christ Jesus, may the Spirit you promised lead us into all truth. May Your word come alive and bring hope. We stand in the watch tower for many different reasons. Please hear our cry and lead us to answers that will bring peace to our hearts. If we are asking the wrong questions, teach us what we should be asking. Don't let discouragement drown out hope. Don't let our failures define our future. And don't let our lack of vision keep us from receiving Your grace. Specifically today, Lord, be with my son Justin. Keep him close to You. Whether he feels it or not, hold him in Your hands. Whether he knows it or not, guide his every step. And give him a fresh drink of Your Peace. Amen

Day Four: "Idolatry and Injustice"

Habakkuk 2:2-20

Themes:

Two major themes flow through all of scripture. The first is that there is one God who loves us and whom we should love. The great safeguard for that truth is the important prohibition of idolatry. The second is the admonition to love others. The great safeguard for that admonition is the prohibition against injustice. The book of Habakkuk shouts both of these truths and their corresponding prohibitions. In the first half of chapter two God speaks about the gross injustice of the people. And, in the last three verses of the chapter God speaks of their idolatry. In doing so, God not only acknowledges the complaints of Habakkuk, but also offers important insight. God declares that the seeds of their own destruction are planted in the actions of the wicked. Those who plunder will be plundered. Those who steal and extort will become victims of those they extorted. Wicked actions move the wicked toward death and destruction. It may not look like it immediately; in the short run. However, evil always leads toward a crumbling pathway, and ultimately a dead end. Conversely, God blesses the faithful. The seeds of eternity are woven into every kind act, every noble deed, every loving gesture and every grace-filled word. It may not look like it immediately; in the short run. However, righteousness always leads toward a beautiful bridge, a season of shalom and a pathway of peace. It is a taste of the eternal Kingdom of God. It doesn't mean that everything is alright now. That is obviously not true. God simply declares that our eyesight is limited. The current state is definitely not the whole story.

Prayer: Shepherd of our souls, consider giving us a glimpse from Your vantage point. Our eyesight is so limited, bound by the timeline in which we live. What we see so often dictates the boundaries of our faith. Instead, Lord, let our faith become the substance of the things we cannot see. Specifically today, Lord, be with my son Justin. Keep him close to You. Whether he feels it or not, hold him in Your hands. Whether he knows it or not, guide his every step. And give him a fresh drink of Your Peace. Amen

Day Five: "The Nature of Righteousness"

Habakkuk 1:4

A different way of thinking:

Self-righteousness is frequently condemned in scripture. It is often equated with arrogance, and many times it is an accusation directed at religious leaders. True righteousness is typically defined as faithful living in obedience to God. We often credit people with living righteously when they are living morally upright lives. Ethical or just actions become the litmus test for righteousness.

Habakkuk 1:4 seems to support this perspective: the righteous are hemmed in and therefore justice is perverted (their acts of justice are thwarted). However, this is not really scripture's perspective on righteousness. In scripture the moniker of righteousness is not earned like the winning of a trophy for outstanding performance. Rather righteousness is something that is imputed or given by the righteous one: God. This doesn't mean that it is like a "participation trophy," but rather like an engagement ring. This is because righteousness is not first and foremost about moral behavior, but instead about relationship.

I have no righteousness on my own. However, when I choose to be in relationship with God, I receive God's Spirit as a pledge of His commitment. And I become God's ring (Haggai 2:23); almost as if you and I are the wedding band God wears indicating our pledge to one another. And just like a finger fills the inside of a ring, so God's Spirit fills us, and we become righteous vessels of God's Spirit.

Therefore, righteousness becomes a consequence of relationship, not a precursor to it. God doesn't wait for me to get it right, to clean up my act, to think correctly or to figure out how to erase my past. God doesn't wait for me to trip up, isn't anxious about my failures, doesn't berate my messed up thinking or fault me for my faults. God wears you and me as a pledge of relationship.

Habakkuk complains that the righteous are being hemmed in. But Habakkuk reveals that he is evaluating righteousness by comparing himself to others (Habakkuk 1:13). This is always disastrous. It will always result in either self-righteousness (arrogance) or self-loathing (depression). God invites us into relationship and to bring an end to comparisons.

Prayer: Oh Grace-Giver, trying to earn Your favor is exhausting. Your law, as beautiful as it is, is overwhelming. Trying to keep Your statutes is impossible. As a result we try to merit Your favor by comparing ourselves to others. That never ends well. Forgive us. We have mocked Your free gift of grace by believing we could earn it. We have destroyed ourselves by saying we can't receive it. We make You out to be a liar by saying You can't mean it. Forgive us. Teach us what it means to be in relationship with you, and help us to trust that righteousness will be the result. Specifically today, Lord, be with my son Justin. Keep him close to You. Whether he feels it or not, hold him in Your hands. Whether he knows it or not, guide his every step. And give him a fresh drink of Your Peace. Amen

Day Six: "The New Habakkuk"

Habakkuk 3:16-19

The Question:

Habakkuk's original question was, "How long, oh Lord?" As often happens, God doesn't seem to answer the questions we want to ask, but instead pushes us to ask the questions we need to ask. In the New Testament Jesus was asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus proceeded to tell the story of the Good Samaritan. The story then concludes with the question, "Who acted neighborly?" The former question leads to minimal rule keeping. The latter question leads to a renewed heart.

In a similar fashion this story begins with, "How long, oh Lord?" And then it moves to the question that God wants us to ask, "Of what value is an idol?" In other words the former question shows that we are consumed with our circumstances. They become an idol to us because we trust the "truth" of our circumstances more than the Truth of God. We tend to bend our image of God to fit our experiences instead of bending our understanding of our circumstances to fit our image of God. The latter question can lead us to a trust in God regardless of the circumstances.

The Conclusion:

Habakkuk has voiced his complaint; that the current state of affairs was terrible. He has asserted what he believed to be God's response; that the Babylonians will destroy us. Habakkuk voices his second complaint; that the alleged "solution" is worse than the original problems. God finally answers; the seeds of their own destruction are inherent in the actions and attitudes of the wicked, just like the seeds of the eternal Kingdom of God are inherent in every action and attitude of the righteous (those in relationship with God). The vision of God's people is too often too narrow. Poor judgements are typically based on limited knowledge. God's principles are absolutely true, so don't be misled by short-term circumstances.

Habakkuk ends by saying he will wait patiently for the circumstances to change (3:16). And even if they don't change immediately, it won't change his trust in God. "Even if the fig tree doesn't bud, or there are no grapes on the vine, even though the olive crop fails, and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights."

Prayer: Creator and Redeemer, hear our prayer. Some days we are not certain that we have even a mustard seed of faith. And so we ask that You hear our confession and know that our hearts long to be close to You. Steady our wavering faith, supply what is lacking, and lead deeper into relationship with You. Help us to wait patiently for the circumstances to change. And even if they don't change immediately, it won't change our trust in You. Specifically today, Lord, be with my son Justin. Keep him close to You. Whether he feels it or not, hold him in Your hands. Whether he knows it or not, guide his every step. And give him a fresh drink of Your Peace. Amen