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Has It Ever Been This Bad Before? Yes!

Habakkuk 1:1-2:1

I suspect that many of you have been asked the same question I am asked on a regular basis. It usually goes something like this:

“Has it ever been this bad before? I can’t imagine that the conditions in our world have ever been as dark and depraved as they are today, in 2020. Might this be an indication that Jesus is about to return to the earth and consummate his kingdom? I find it hard to believe that the world can survive much longer the mess we’ve created for ourselves.”

Let me answer this by saying, Yes, it has been this bad and even worse before, and, much to your dismay, I have no idea if Jesus is about to return to bring judgment on the wicked and vindication of the righteous.

You might be inclined to push back on me by reminding me of the deplorable conditions in our world: sexual promiscuity, divorce rates skyrocketing, a pandemic that has devastated our economy, abortion on demand, so-called same-sex marriage widely embraced, racial division and hostility ever-increasing, political rancor and endless argumentation, pornography, crime rates soaring, out of control wildfires, gulf coast hurricanes, angry and destructive protests in the streets, atheism everywhere, a multitude of terrorist activities, and idolatry of every imaginable expression. And you think it could be worse than that? Yes.

My purpose in saying this is not to discourage you. Quite to the contrary. I want to remind you of three fundamental truths. **First**, God is now, always has been, and always will be the sovereign Lord over all people and all nations. In other words, there is *purpose* in what God is doing and in what he permits. **Second**, God is also a holy avenger who will bring to justice and impose perfect punishment on those who defy him and his will. In other words, there is *judgment* coming to the earth. Those who are wreaking havoc and mayhem on our society will be held accountable. **Third**, our God who is sovereign Lord and who is the righteous judge and avenger is also immeasurably merciful, slow to anger and quick to forgive. In other words, there is *hope*.

Why do I say this? On what basis do I say it? There are numerous places in Scripture where these three truths may be found, but none can do so with the clarity and conviction as can the book of Habakkuk. Believe it or not, you will very quickly identify with Habakkuk. His pain and frustration and confusion are no different from yours. But his God is also your God. So today and next Sunday we are going back in time to learn from Habakkuk how to trust this glorious God of ours when times are terrible and all hope seems to be lost and the world appears to be swirling out of control.

The Setting of Habakkuk and his Struggles

I need to briefly rehearse with you a bit of OT history. Following the reign of Solomon, whom you will recall was David’s son, the nation of Israel divided, it split in two, not unlike what happened here in America during the Civil War when our country split into the North and South. [I must interject at this point and make sure you understand

that I'm not suggesting that the United States of America is in any way the contemporary counterpart of OT Israel! In this present age the only "nation" in covenant with God is the Church of Jesus Christ.]

Ten of the original tribes of Israel aligned themselves to form what was known as the northern kingdom, called Israel. Its capital was in Samaria. The two remaining tribes, Judah and Benjamin, formed the southern kingdom, called Judah. Its capital was, of course, in Jerusalem. All this took place around the middle of the 10th century b.c.

Habakkuk was a prophet of God to the southern kingdom of Judah. He was, in all likelihood, a contemporary of Jeremiah, and possibly also of Ezekiel and Daniel. By the time Habakkuk prophesied, the southern kingdom of Judah was all that was left of the covenant people of God. In 722 b.c., about a century before Habakkuk lived, the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun, destroyed, and dispersed by the Assyrians.

During the life and ministry of Habakkuk, the situation in Judah was indescribably corrupt and wicked. The word "abomination" doesn't do justice to the perversity and idolatry that existed in Judah in the 7th century. As I said at the outset, there was a time when conditions were actually worse than they are today. Let me give you just one example.

Hezekiah was a good and righteous king over Judah. He reigned for 29 years. His son, Manasseh ascended the throne in 697 b.c. when Hezekiah died. Although Hezekiah was a good man and provided a godly home for his son, Manasseh eventually became the most wicked king that Judah had ever seen. It is just one vivid example of the fact that children do not necessarily follow in the ways of their parents.

Manasseh ruled the southern kingdom of Judah for 55 years. Here in the U.S. we are blessed with a system of government in which a President can be voted out of office after four years and is only allowed to serve, at most, eight years. But no such system existed in the 7th century b.c. Manasseh ruled for 55 years! Listen to these brief descriptions of his tenure in office, as found in 2 Kings 21.

And he [Manasseh] did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. For he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed, and he erected altars for Baal and made an Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. And he built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem will I put my name." And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. And he burned his son as an offering and used fortune-telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. And the carved image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house of which the LORD said to David and to Solomon his son, "In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever. . . .

[In 2 Chronicles 33:6 we are told that it wasn't just one "son" whom Manasseh sacrificed in the fire. There we read that "he burned his sons (plural) as an offering in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom."]

And Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel.

And the LORD said by his servants the prophets, "Because Manasseh king of Judah has committed these abominations and has done things more evil than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has made Judah also to sin with his idols, therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such disaster that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle. And I

will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plumb line of the house of Ahab, and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. And I will forsake the remnant of my heritage and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies, because they have done what is evil in my sight and have provoked me to anger, since the day their fathers came out of Egypt, even to this day.”

Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides the sin that he made Judah to sin so that they did what was evil in the sight of the LORD (2 Kings 21:2-7, 9-16).

Many believe, and I agree, that the “innocent blood” that Manasseh shed included that of Isaiah, the prophet, who was “sawn in two” (cf. Heb. 11:37).

After Manasseh died, his twenty-two-year-old son, Amon, ascended to the throne and

“he did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, as Manasseh his father had done. He walked in all the way in which his father walked and served the idols that his father served and worshiped them. He abandoned the LORD, the God of his fathers, and did not walk in the way of the LORD” (2 Kings 21:19-22).

I hope by now you are beginning to get a glimpse of how horrific it was in Judah in the 7th century. One explicit indication of how bad it was in Judah is what God said to Jeremiah:

“As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you” (Jer. 7:16).

This was the setting for the life and ministry of Habakkuk. This was the understandable cause for his perplexity. You can almost hear him cry out: “**Lord, do something!** Discipline your people. Don’t let them sin with impunity! How can you just sit by silently in heaven and do nothing while all this is happening among your people?” Note well. This wasn’t happening among the pagan nations of the earth. This was the condition of life and religion among the Jewish people, the people in covenant with God.

Look again at Habakkuk’s cry in v. 2 –

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” (Hab. 1:2).

Habakkuk had evidently been crying out to God in prayer for quite some time and had reached the point of complete and utter befuddlement. Today, we can at least hope for some justice to be served and for criminals to be prosecuted. But not in 7th century b.c. Judah. Look again at v. 4 –

“So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted” (Hab. 1:4).

The word translated “paralyzed” literally means “numbed,” like hands rendered useless from exposure to the cold. Frozen and incapable of acting. The “law,” says Habakkuk, no longer is honored and is utterly broken. In v. 3 Habakkuk complained that “destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise” (Hab. 1:3).

It is clear that the only hope for Judah is divine intervention. But when it isn't forthcoming, faith is stretched to the limit. Hope appears to be lost.

What exactly did Habakkuk expect God to do? Maybe he prayed for yet more prophets to rise up and denounce the sins of Judah. Perhaps he prayed for a new king to replace the rapacious and perverted Manasseh. He surely would have asked for the Spirit of repentance and revival to sweep through the land.

But heaven stayed silent. When heaven did finally speak, Habakkuk was blown away. The perplexity he experienced while God remained silent was nothing compared to the perplexity he felt when God finally spoke. When God eventually answered Habakkuk's prayer, the prophet in all likelihood said to himself, "I wish I had kept my big mouth shut!"

So, what did God say? When he finally broke his silence and answered Habakkuk's prayer, what did God declare that he would do? We read of this in vv. 5-11 . . .

God doesn't argue with Habakkuk and tell him that he has exaggerated how bad it is in Judah. He wholeheartedly agrees with the prophet. Neither does God rebuke Habakkuk for complaining. Did you notice the four words in v. 5 in God's response: **Look! See! Wonder! Be astounded!** That is God's way of alerting Habakkuk that the answer to his prayers will stretch the limits of credulity. Look again at v. 5b – "For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told." If anyone else had described for you what I'm about to say, you would never have believed them. So listen closely.

Beginning with v. 6 God outlines for Habakkuk how he is going to answer his prayer and how he is going to deal with the corruption and wickedness and idolatry in Judah. In effect, he says this:

"Habakkuk, brace yourself! I'm going to discipline my people. I will not stand idly by and let them sin with impunity. But the instrument that I will use to judge Judah may surprise you. I'm going to raise up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, the ancestors of modern-day Iraq, and cause them to sweep into Judah and destroy Jerusalem and its temple and take my people into captivity for 70 years!"

Two things in particular make God's answer to Habakkuk's prayer so seemingly unbelievable. First, twenty years earlier this nation was hardly known to exist. Its rapid rise to prominence and power could only be attributed to the hand of God and his determination to bring judgment against his own covenant people. Second, and even more shocking, is the fact that ***the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, were even more wicked and corrupt than Judah! It is one thing for God to chastise and discipline his people by making use of another nation. It is something else entirely when the other nation is even more wicked than they!***

If I may be allowed to speak for Habakkuk: "God, you've got to be kidding me! The Chaldeans? But God, they are even more wicked and corrupt than we are! Manasseh and his son, Amon, were indescribably wicked and corrupt, but the leaders and people of Babylon are even worse!"

God says, "I know. Listen to my description of them." This follows in vv. 6-11. Let me highlight just a couple of things that God says of them.

v. 7 – The Chaldeans determine for themselves what constitutes justice. They don't consider God. They have no regard for anything other than what proceeds from their own corrupt hearts.

v. 8 – The Chaldean cavalry is compared to three predators: leopards, wolves, eagles.

v. 9 – Their armies move forward as one unit, bent on violence, taking their enemies captive like so much sand gathered up in one's hand.

v. 10 – Their arrogance is unparalleled as they show contempt for all other authority; they deride and mock and scoff at other kings and rulers.

v. 11 – They worship their own strength and military success. They regard themselves as incapable of wrongdoing.

Habakkuk can't believe what he's hearing. He is utterly stunned and left breathless. Surely not, Lord. Surely what you are saying to me has been garbled in transmission. But on further thought, Habakkuk comes to grips with what God is going to do. We read of his response in vv. 12-17.

Habakkuk's Response to the Answer to his Prayer

Let me briefly walk us through what Habakkuk says.

v. 12 – He reminds God that he is eternal and holy. This gives him confidence that whatever the Chaldeans will do to Judah, God's people will not be utterly annihilated: "We shall not die."

v. 13 – But Habakkuk is still perplexed. God, he says, "your eyes are too pure to look upon the depths of evil that is perpetrated by the Chaldeans. So how can you raise them up to bring judgment against us? Yes, granted, we are evil. But they're worse!" Habakkuk could have handled it if God had disciplined Judah directly. After all, God is obviously more holy than the people of Judah. But how can God judge Judah by a people who are immeasurably more corrupt than they? It's as if he says, "God, how can you avoid compromising your own holiness by using such an unholy nation?"

vv. 14-17 – Here he envisions the nations and peoples as if they are so many fish and sea creatures, a teeming mass with no rhyme or reason or anyone to rule over them, vulnerable to the whims of the fisherman. Along comes Babylon, the fishermen, who callously and cheerfully gathers them into his nets and catches them with the hook. Just as the fish appear to exist solely to satisfy the greedy desires of the fishermen, so the nations exist for Babylon's rapacious satisfaction.

The reference in v. 15 to the fisherman bringing up the fish "*with a hook*" is more than a vivid figure of speech. The Babylonians literally would drive a hook through the sensitive lower lip of their captives and string them together in single file as a sadistic way of humiliating and subduing their enemies.

The whole thing is simply beyond Habakkuk's ability to understand. To his mind, God has answered a prayer to heal a headache by giving cancer! It is as if a woman, instead of soap, uses dirt and grime to clean her messy floor.

Habakkuk is obviously aware of the audacity of his response to God. He has directly challenged the propriety of what God has said he is going to do. So he braces himself for the rebuke that he believes is certain to come. He will not try to resolve what seems to him a contradiction. Instead, he will station himself and watch and listen for an answer that must come from the Lord. We see this in Habakkuk 2:1,

“I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint” (Hab. 2:1).

Only God can resolve this problem. Divine revelation, not human speculation, is his only hope. So, what is God’s answer? We’ll have to wait until next week to find out!

But I won’t make you wait. Let me provide a brief preview and some lessons we can learn from this.

Conclusion

As I said at the beginning, there are three primary truths for us to learn.

First, it is entirely understandable if you and I should wake up each day and learn what happened yet again last night and wonder: Where is God? Why won’t he do something about the chaos and wickedness in our land? Habakkuk woke up every day asking the same question. And God was quick to remind him that notwithstanding all evidence to the contrary, he, God, is in complete control. He has not abandoned his creation. He continues to exert supreme and sovereign control over all things.

Second, like Habakkuk, we live in a time when justice is twisted and criminals run free and no one seems to hold anyone accountable for their actions. But God is holy and will avenge the righteous. He is the righteous judge of all. If not in this life, if not today or tomorrow, he will bring justice to bear on mankind. No one is getting away with anything (see Rev. 20:11-15).

Third, like Habakkuk, we need to be reminded that in the midst of what feels like hell on earth, there is hope. We may not like the way God is doing things. We may question his timing. We may doubt the effectiveness of his methods. But hope remains, because our God is holy and true and altogether worthy of our trust, no matter how bad things may get. This is the assurance that Habakkuk lays hold of in the final words of his prophecy:

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places” (Hab. 3:17-19).

The point of that majestic declaration of faith is to remind us all that circumstances on earth, in our country, in our city, may never improve during our lifetime. It may even get worse. Conditions here in the U.S. and around the world may come close to the depravity and idolatry rampant in the southern kingdom of Judah in the 7th century b.c.

But we have hope because we have God! In the midst of human wickedness and destruction and degenerate behavior, we, like Habakkuk, can “rejoice in the Lord.” We can “take joy in the God of our salvation.” We must, therefore, daily remind ourselves that “God, the Lord,” is our “strength!”

Let me close with one example of how “hope” remains even in the midst of unimaginable sin and idolatry. You may be wondering: “It’s one thing to speak of hope. It’s one thing to contend that the mercy and forgiveness of God never disappear. But what about someone like Manasseh? After a lifetime of utter wickedness, was there any hope for him? Is there any hope for *me*?”

The answer is given to us in 2 Chronicles 33. Listen to what it says:

“Therefore the Lord brought upon them [i.e., the people of Judah] the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon. And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the Lord his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God. . . . And he took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built on the mountain of the house of the Lord and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside of the city. He also restored the altar of the Lord and offered on it sacrifices of peace offerings and of thanksgiving, and he commanded Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel” (2 Chronicles 33:11-13, 15-16).

It's never too late! There is always hope! The Lord remains merciful and will forgive the worst of sinners if they turn to him in repentance and faith.