

FOCUS SPOT 1

Habakkuk is a book about questions. We have one right at the start of verse 2

“How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.” (Habakkuk 1:2-3 NIV)

Habakkuk is not having a great time. There is violence, there is injustice, there is destruction and this is among his own people.

So who is Habakkuk, or maybe as I have heard it pronounced Habak-kuk rather than Haba-kkuk? We do not really know a lot about him as he is only mentioned here. His name means *to embrace*. Along with Haggai and Zechariah he is referred to as a prophet.

When was he around? It is usually taken as being around 605 BC. We have the clue in verse 6

“I am raising up the Babylonians (or Chaldeans, as some translations have it), that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling-places not their own.” (Habakkuk 1:6 NIV)

We know that the Babylonians were in power from 720 BC to 538 BC. In 640 BC one Josiah became king of Judah and he did try and reform Judah bringing back to worshipping the true and only God. He was followed by Jehoiakim in 609 BC who was a not a good king and even more kept changing sides between Egypt and the Babylonians or Chaldeans, the names being interchangeable. Jehoiakim died in 597 BC.

So looking at the evidence, Jerusalem is still standing, it did not fall until 586 BC, the lack of morals among the nation of Judah means it is probably after the death of Josiah, so the date is put around 605 BC, but it is all conjecture really

So Habakkuk is having problems. There is violence, destruction and injustice all around him and he wants to know from God how long this state of affairs is going to go on and what God is going to do about it. We too can cry like that. Why is it that gun and knife crimes are on the increase? What is God going to do about the violence?

Well, God does answer Habakkuk. He starts off by saying, 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.” (Habakkuk 1:5 NIV)

Or as the Good News Bible puts it

“...“Keep watching the nations round you, and you will be astonished at what you see. I am going to do something that you will not believe when you hear about it.” (Habakkuk 1:5 GNB)

And God used an unusual way to sort out the problem within Judah – he sends the Babylonians to conquer them and take over the country. Not the way that Habakkuk would have thought. He maybe thought of

- New king – one who was God in the eyes of the Lord and not evil
- Religious revival in the country so people turned back to God

- God sending a visible visitation, a sign of his displeasure and that he is real and there - then people would turn to him

But no! God sends the Chaldeans, a nation known for its cruelty. I'm not sure if Habakkuk really wanted to hear this, but God was saying various things

- I can and will use unusual means to bring about my purposes. We can get caught up in wanting God to do something our way, to sort out a problem the way we would sort it out, but this may not be his way. We have to expect the unexpected at times. God does not work in our box and although at times we acknowledge that with our heads, we do not always believe it in our hearts. So watch out when you ask God for something to happen and it doesn't go quite the way you meant it – it will be God's way.

“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.”

(Habakkuk 1:5 NIV)

- I am in control is also what else God is saying. It may look like chaos to you, but I have it all in hand. At times we can speak and act like practical atheist. We theoretically know that God is in control; we say that God is in control, but we then live as if he isn't and talk as if he isn't. However God is and we need to keep that in our minds.

READING 2

Habakkuk 1:12-2:20

FOCUS SPOT 2

Oh no. The solution is worse than the original problem! How can you, God, let this happen?
Chapter 1, verse 13

“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?” (Habakkuk 1:13 NIV)

Yes, the Judeans may have been bad, but the Chaldeans are a lot worse! You, a God who cannot tolerate wickedness have allowed this to happen. You told me you are in control and this is what happens. Hard questions from Habakkuk to God, but God is big enough to take the questions. We should not be those who shy away from asking God hard questions.

There are Christians who will not question anything about their faith, about God. They usually defend it by saying that they have a simple faith which they are happy with.

However in life we question and when we question we grow. I can remember both our daughters going through a time of questions, questions, questions. Everything was ‘Why?’ And when you answered that question, so one came on the back of that. I remember one occasion when Sue and I were asked by one daughter, “Can I sleep with you in your bed tonight?”

“No, because you have a lovely bedroom of your own,” – trying to be person-centred!

“But I would prefer to sleep with you – why can't I?”

“Because you are a big girl now and so you sleep on your own”

“But I'm afraid on my own. Why can't I sleep with you?”

“How can you be afraid in your lovely room with all your friends like Mr Teddy and Mrs Giraffe. You need to learn to sleep on you own.”

“Why can't I sleep with you, you and mummy sleep in the same room?”

I'm still trying to work out a reasonable answer to that one – any answers on a postcard, please.

We can question God about things and in this book of the Bible, in this question there is also a moral question that arises. That arises in this interchange between Habakkuk and God. The moral question is

How can God use an iniquitous enemy nation to punish a people who are more righteous than the punishers?

We know from the first interchange that Judah is far from being squeaky clean, but for God to use the Chaldeans who as it says in chapter 1:7

“...they are a law to themselves and promote their own honour.” (Habakkuk 1:7 NIV)

But the answer is given in that in the arrogance of the Chaldeans will be the seeds of their own destruction. We read there about the four woes

- Woe to the one who steal and exhorts – they will lose everything by others taking from them
- Woe to the one who builds on unjust gains. Just recently there was a programme on television about TW3 – That Was The Week That Was with David Frost, Millicent Martin and a host of others. I could not remember whether it was TW3 or the Frost Report that came after it, but in one of those two there was the famous interview with Peter Rackman – the infamous landlord who charged high rents, for lousy, damp, rat infested accommodation – and his enforcement of unpaid debts was strict. He was friends with Christine Keeler and the Kray twins. Rackmanism came into the language because of him. However he was interviewed by David Frost and got very upset when questioned about his unjust gains and his poor housing and high rent. They then change the law.

So the one who is rich by unjust gains will be exposed, as the very fabric will cry out

- Woe to those who indulged in violence – they will all come to nothing and be vanquished
- Woe to those who take advantage of their neighbours – they too will be taken advantage of and be embarrassed as you have embarrassed others.

But there is a promise in the midst of this dilemma –the solution seemingly so much more horrible than the original problem. Verse 14

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” (Habakkuk 2:14 NIV)

The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. It will happen because God has said it will. God is not an idol as we read of at the end of that chapter. Idols are useless and

- Woe to those who go to idols – anything that is put before God. There is no life in idols, so they can never help, never save anyone. The idols today may not be made of wood or stone, they made be consumerism, the one-eyed idol that can be made of the television found in virtually all houses in this country and more. – Try to follow it and it gives no real guidance

So we have the tremendous promise in verse 14, that God will be known over all the earth, just like the water on the earth and then the command in verse 20

“But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.”
(Habakkuk 2:20 NIV)

Again reiterating that God is on control – whatever is happening, even if all seems lost – God is still in control – he is still in his Temple and all is under his feet.

READING

Habakkuk 3:1-19

FOCUS SPOT 3

We have had the questions, now we have the prayer of Habakkuk. A prayer that I remember well but for a peculiar wisdom. In the youth group I grew up in at Braintree we were a very diverse lot. Within the group there were Anglicans, people from Barnston Mission, Some from Notley Baptist Church, and some came from Halstead Strict Baptist. One of those was called Brian, but he was nicknamed Levi because of his Strict Baptist background. Well one day one of the girls came in with a letter that Brian had written to her and appeared to be a little upset with the letter. The letter read something like

Dear Yvonne or should I say Miss Heard

I understand from Deborah, Heather and Sue that all of you went to the theatre last Saturday evening, where you sat downstairs. I am shocked that you could do such a thing which is strictly forbidden for you in Habakkuk 3:17.

Love in Christ

Brian

In those days we only had the King James version, so several went for their Bibles and turned to Habakkuk 3:17 where we read

“Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls:” (Habakkuk 3:17 AV)

So I remember Habakkuk 3:17 very well and I’m not sure if God is really worried how you remember his word, but we are called upon to commit it to our hearts and before we can do that we have to commit it to our minds. I would like to say that Yvonne wasn’t really upset as she knew that Brian only meant it as a joke!

But we do need to finish off the thought of Habakkuk 3:17, so to go again from verse 17

“Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, 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 Saviour.” (Habakkuk 3:17-18 NIV)

So all had changed for Habakkuk! Not in the slightest. He realises that God is in control but that there is also that fact that God can be a destructive force, verse 5

“Plague went before him; pestilence followed his steps. He stood, and shook the earth; he looked, and made the nations tremble. The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed. His ways are eternal. I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish. Were you angry with the rivers, O LORD? Was your wrath against the streams? Did you rage against the sea when you rode with your horses and your victorious chariots? You uncovered your bow, you called for many arrows. Selah You split the earth with rivers; the mountains saw you and writhed. Torrents of water swept by; the deep roared and lifted its waves on high.” (Habakkuk 3:5-10 NIV)

There is not one note of things getting better in this prayer. The only hope that Habakkuk has is the past, verse 2

“LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.”
(Habakkuk 3:2 NIV)

We have heard of past deeds, God, how’s about some now. He recalls two past deeds of God

- In verse 11 we have the incident with Joshua mentioned where they needed more time to win a battle so God stopped the rotation of the earth to allow this to happen although from the earth’s viewpoint we have as it says in verse 11

“Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightning of your flashing spear.” (Habakkuk 3:11 NIV)

- Then in verse 14-15 we have the time when the Egyptians chased after the Israelites through the Red Sea, the dry path which God had made through the Red Sea and then of course the walls of water that were built up came tumbling down on the Egyptian horsemen and it was as if they could say to God

“You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters.”
(Habakkuk 3:15 NIV)

But for Habakkuk this was all waiting, waiting, but he still wanted to rejoice in the Lord and be joyful in God his Saviour and look to God for all things.

“yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights...” (Habakkuk 3:18-19 NIV)

This is far more than just whistling in the dark forest to keep one’s spirits up. This is having confidence that God is in control and has all things in hand.

Hopefully we believe that and will live like that – knowing that our God has everything in hand.