

Freedom Way M.B.C.

Bible Study Lesson #633

Date _____

When God Seems Unfair (Prophet Habakkuk)

Biblical Passage: Habakkuk 1:1–2:4

Supporting Passages: Habakkuk 2:5–3:19;
Hebrews 10:35–39

Memory Verse: Habakkuk 2:4

Biblical Truth: Although he could not see God's plan, Habakkuk learned he should still place his faith in God.

Context: Habakkuk served as a prophet when violence against Israel had increased due to war. Babylon was gaining power over Assyria and Egypt. Threats of invasion from the north caused much distress among the people of Judah. Although it seemed that God was doing nothing about the violence, God assured Habakkuk that He is the One who controls the wicked.

INVESTIGATION

Habakkuk prophesied in the late seventh century B.C. during the same period as Jeremiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah. The tone of the book suggests that Babylon's initial invasion of Judah (605 B.C.) was imminent. Therefore, the book was written shortly before 605 B.C. during the reign of Judah's evil King Jehoiakim. The book is unusual in at least two respects. First, rather than preaching to the people, Habakkuk spoke to God about His people. Second, he employed dialogue (questions and answers) as a key method for presenting his message.

After a spiritual high under good King Josiah (639–608 B.C.), Judah plummeted into a moral abyss during the reign of Josiah's son, Jehoiakim (608–599 B.C.). War and violence raged across the earth, oppressing the righteous. In chapters 1–2, Habakkuk grappled with two great mysteries about sin: Why did God permit evil to go unpunished in Judah (Hab. 1:2–11)? And how could a righteous God use Babylon—a far more wicked nation—to judge Judah (Hab. 1:12–2:20)?

God's answers to these questions helped Habakkuk come to terms with the apparent contradiction between a holy, just God and a sin-riddled world. Habakkuk then concluded his prophecy with a magnificent hymn of praise to his sovereign Lord (Hab. 3). Habakkuk's discoveries help believers keep a proper focus today.

IMPORTANCE

The passage in Habakkuk reveals humanity's limited knowledge compared to God's infinite wisdom and supreme ways. It focuses on the essential truth that God Is.

Habakkuk was honest before God and questioned the things about God that he did not understand. Yet for each of Habakkuk's questions, God revealed His complete sovereignty. Habakkuk asked, "How long, O LORD, must I call for your help, but you do not listen? . . . Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?" (Hab. 1:2–3) God responded in an unexpected way: "I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people . . . to seize dwelling places not their own" (Hab. 1:6). God is true, living, and infinite, and all nations are under His control—even wicked Babylon in Habakkuk's day.

This passage raises some difficult questions about God's nature and the problem of evil in the world. But as believers study the way Habakkuk questioned God and the way God answered, they will understand His character more fully. And like it did for Habakkuk, this dialogue should lead them to praise God for His infinite ways and holy, wise counsel.

This passage also touches on other key truths: The Future is in God's Hands and People are God's Treasure.

INTERPRETATION

Habakkuk 1:1–2 Habakkuk began his prophecy with a string of questions for God (vv. 2–3). He was mystified as to how a holy God could tolerate sin in Judah. Initially, his boldness seems shocking, but the questions did not offend God. God is always ready to listen to people's needs and to help with their problems. To Habakkuk, God appeared unconcerned that His people were

637
mistreated. No divine help had arrived, and Habakkuk pleaded with God, "How long" (v. 2). God did not even seem to be listening. Judah was filled with crime and violence. Righteous people were being harmed; yet God had not intervened to save them. Habakkuk wondered, "God, where are You?"

Habakkuk 1:3 In verse 2, Habakkuk asked God how long evil would continue; now he asked why God permitted evil to exist. The prophet used six expressions to describe the evils rampant in Judean society—"injustice," "wrong," "destruction," "violence," "strife," and "conflict." Injustice pervaded Judah's legal system. The rich and powerful wronged the poor and weak in the courts. Evildoers wreaked destruction on the righteous and Judean society.

Habakkuk 1:4 Habakkuk now specified the "injustice" (v. 3) in Judah's legal system. Judges did not follow Israel's law code ("the law is paralyzed") and rendered unjust verdicts ("wicked hem in the righteous"). The wealthy bribed judges in order to gain property and possessions (1 Kings 21:1-16). Habakkuk graphically depicted the corrupt conditions during the reign of evil King Jehoiakim. Godly leadership is vital.

Habakkuk 1:5 Finally, God broke His silence and responded to Habakkuk's prayers. God informed Habakkuk that He was well aware of the evils of Judean society and would soon act so decisively that Habakkuk and his countrymen ("you," plural in the Hebrew) would be stunned. God told the prophet to "look" to the world scene ("the nations"). Babylon was a rising superpower. Nabopolassar (626-605 B.C.), the first king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, had defeated mighty Nineveh in 612 B.C. and would soon stand at the gates of Jerusalem.

Habakkuk 1:6-7 What shocked Habakkuk was God's revelation that He would soon raise up the Babylonians to punish Judah (v. 12). The Babylonians were "ruthless" (2 Kings 25:7-11), far worse than the people of Judah, and "impetuous" (eager to conquer other nations). Little wonder other nations "feared and dreaded" Babylon. "A law to themselves" means they did as they pleased.

Habakkuk 1:8-11 Nebuchadnezzar was one of history's most brilliant military commanders, and

his forces swept through nations like a tidal wave. Habakkuk's vivid imagery (such as "swifter than leopards") signifies Babylon's army as swift, cruel, and fearless. The Babylonians would come to destroy—"bent on violence." Soldiers were paid from the plunder of conquered cities, and they were eager to fight. Centuries earlier, God had warned of this consequence if Israel did not keep His Law: "The LORD will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down, a nation whose language you will not understand" (Deut. 28:49). God used the Babylonians as His instrument, but they did not realize this. They arrogantly attributed their victories to their "own strength." Power was Babylon's "god." Though heaven's Judge used these "guilty men" to accomplish His purpose, someday the Babylonians would pay for their crimes as well.

Habakkuk 1:12 Habakkuk's first dilemma concerned the mystery of the presence of sin. How could a righteous God allow sinful Judah to go unpunished? God's revelation that He planned to use the Babylonians to punish Judah created a second dilemma for the prophet (vv. 12-17). How could Habakkuk's "Holy One" use Babylon, a nation far more wicked, to punish Judah? It seemed totally unfair. Would Americans not have felt horrified if God had used Saddam Hussein's evil regime to punish the United States for its sins? The pronoun "my" appears twice in this verse and emphasizes Habakkuk's personal relationship with God ("my God, my Holy One"). "Rock" is a symbol of security and protection. As a figure for God, the expression appears only here in the Minor Prophets, though it is common in Psalms (Pss. 18:2, 31; 19:14; 95:1). Mighty Babylon could easily have annihilated Judah, but Habakkuk felt confident God would keep His covenant promises to preserve the nation from permanent annihilation.

Habakkuk 1:13 This verse gives one of the greatest descriptions in the Bible of God's holiness. God not only hates sin, He hates the very sight of it ("Your eyes are too pure to look on evil"). How then, Habakkuk wondered, could God "tolerate the treacherous" and seemingly remain silent when the wicked (Judah and the Babylonians, but primarily the latter) oppressed the righteous? Habakkuk 2:6-20 records the answer to this dilemma. God revealed to Habakkuk that the wicked's certain fate is

judgment or woe. Moreover, nothing can stop God's victory over evil (Hab. 2:13-14), because He is the true God and ruler of the universe (Hab. 2:20). Someday, the books will be balanced, and the righteous will receive their reward.

Habakkuk 1:14-17 Like helpless "fish" the oppressed got caught in the net of their "wicked foe," enabling the foe to live "in luxury." Rather than giving glory to God, the oppressor worshiped ("sacrifices to") "his net"—his own military power. "Destroying nations without mercy" makes clear that Habakkuk primarily focused on the Babylonian menace (v. 6).

Habakkuk 2:1 Habakkuk had pleaded with God for help in understanding this mystery of evil. He stationed himself like a watchman (Isa. 21:11-12; Ezek. 3:17; 33:2, 6, 7; Hos. 9:8) on a tower looking eagerly for God's answer.

Habakkuk 2:2 Finally, God spoke to His waiting servant and instructed him to record the revelation on tablets so that it could be preserved. Ancient writing tablets were composed of clay, stone (Ten Commandments, Ex. 31:18), wood, or even metal. Most likely, Habakkuk wrote his message on clay (Ezek. 4:1). Once dried, the writing could be preserved for millennia. The "herald" either proclaimed the message as he ran or read the message and then ran to share it, probably the latter. God's revelation was to be recorded, preserved, and proclaimed to all.

Habakkuk 2:3 God told Habakkuk to wait patiently. The prophecy of Babylon's doom (vv. 4-20) may "linger," but it would certainly be fulfilled at the "appointed time." Habakkuk had been unable to understand how God could use wicked Babylon to judge Judah. Here God explained that after using Babylon to punish the nations, He would then punish Babylon.

Habakkuk 2:4 In verses 4-20, God set forth His case against Babylon. The first part of verse 4 begins with a condemnation of Babylon's pride ("puffed up") and evil desires. Verse 5 continues the denunciation. In the midst of this dismal description of Babylon's wickedness, rests one of the most precious theological gems in the Bible—"the righteous will live by his faith." Most translations render the Hebrew word, *'emunah*, as "faith" in this verse (NIV, KJV, HCSB, NASB, NRSV), but it could also be rendered

"faithfulness" (NIV marginal reading). The basic idea of the root, *'aman*, ("confirm, support") denotes firmness or certainty. Hebrew *'emunah* means "firmness, steadfastness, faithfulness." The word "amen" ("truly, verily") derives from the same Hebrew root. Scholars have debated whether "faith" or "faithfulness" makes a more appropriate translation of *'emunah* in this context. However, faith and faithfulness are inseparable, the latter always flowing naturally from the former.

Though brief (only three words in the Hebrew original), the theological significance of this text cannot be overstated. The Apostle Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4 to stress that God's way of salvation is by faith, not works (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11). Justification by faith was the cry of Martin Luther and the other reformers who launched the Protestant Reformation. "Live" may also refer to the abundant spiritual life or physical life (deliverance during the impending Babylonian invasion) of the faithful.

IMPLICATIONS

Have you ever wondered how a holy God could permit evil? Habakkuk did. The prophet lived in a world full of danger and injustice, and he was confused. The world today is still dangerous, and it still sometimes seems the wicked prosper while the righteous get mistreated. This seems unfair. How could a just God allow the wicked to mistreat the righteous and seemingly go free? Habakkuk cried out to God for answers, and God assured him He was well aware of earth's sin and would certainly punish those guilty at the proper time.

This lesson is especially important for Discoverers. God explained much to Habakkuk, but there was still much that he did not understand. Habakkuk lived by faith in God (Hab. 2:4), an example for us today. He rejoiced in the fact that God's victory over evil is certain (2:14). When Jesus Christ comes again violence, injustice, and war will become distant memories. New believers who just started learning about God's character need to understand that God's plan sometimes remains a mystery. However, we can take comfort in the Apostle Paul's words, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Planet earth is not spinning out of control after all!