

Food for Thought Article: “Habakkuk – God’s Word for Today.”

Introduction:

Habakkuk is not an easy book to find in the Bible; it seems to move around as you look for it! And knowing that it lies between Nahum and Zephaniah doesn't really help either!

However, it is one of the prophetic books, I believe, that really does speak most powerfully into the international, political, economic, environmental, and social situations which the world faces today. It is a word that speaks both to the nations globally and to us personally and pastorally.

I have never been too keen on describing the prophetic books of the Old Testament as either 'major prophets' or 'minor prophets;' as though the 'major' were somehow more important than the 'minor.' Let's just call them 'longer' or 'shorter' prophetic books. And Habakkuk, one of the shortest, nevertheless packs a relevant and powerful punch.

Habakkuk – the Man

His name means 'Embracer' or 'Clinger' ~ he really did have to hold onto God in difficult circumstances. We might say there were times when he was holding on to God by the 'skin of his teeth!'

Twice he is called 'Habakkuk the prophet' (1:1; 3:1). This means he was one of the 'in crowd' of prophets; recognised as a prophet by other prophets and the community. Hence, he is different, for example, from Amos who, until God called him to prophesy, 'was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet.' (Amos 7:14)

Habakkuk lived at a time when God was 'raising up the Babylonians' (Hab. 1:6). This started with Nabopolassar coming to the throne of Babylon in 626 BC and continued when they captured the Assyrian capital Nineveh in 612 BC and moved on to defeat the Egyptians in 605 BC at the battle of Carchemish.

So it's possible that Habakkuk prophesied around 615 BC, just before the Babylonians gained power over the whole region. From Habakkuk's perspective, God told him that the Babylonians were on their way and this prospect, for Habakkuk, was unnerving, shocking, and even unbelievable.

Prophets as 'Burden carriers'

Many prophecies these days seem to be light, frothy affairs, but the prophecy God gave to Habakkuk felt like a heavy weight to carry.

Verse 1 reads, 'The burden ('massa') that Habakkuk the prophet saw/gazed at ('chazah'). This was not a quick, casual glance from Habakkuk, but a detailed and troubling contemplation of 'the state of the nation.'

Old Testament prophets were often referred to as 'seers.' They didn't just hear and speak words; they saw with their eyes. In fact, God often tested prophets with what they saw before he gave them words to speak. If we do not see accurately, we can't speak accurately. So, what did Habakkuk see? Looking only at his own nation of Judah, he saw violence, wrongdoing, destruction, perverted justice, and the wicked oppressing the righteous. It was like our watching the national news on television!

This, for Habakkuk, became a heavy burden. He didn't respond by just switching off the T.V. and saying, 'Why should I be bothered?' Instead, he engaged with God on the content of what he saw by means of

..... Interrogatory Prayer

Habakkuk responds to what God is revealing to him by showing his dissatisfaction and by asking God questions. This, I believe, is one of the important ways in which we grow in our Christian faith i.e. by bringing all our disappointments, frustrations, and perplexities to God and asking him what is happening and what he is doing about the situations we face!

I believe we can hide behind pristine intercessory prayers rather than deal with the nitty gritty of interrogatory prayer!

However, if we engage with God in interrogatory prayer, we can expect to hear some difficult replies from God. This is because when we start to ask God questions, he will start to ask us questions and point out things that we may find difficult to accept, have an answer to, or even believe.

For example. After Job's tirade of questions to God, God eventually spoke and asked Job a question. God's first question was a great one! 'Job, stand up like a man: Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?' Umm...

Another example, this time from Paul. Three times Paul asked God a question, 'Lord please take away this messenger from Satan which is tormenting me?' When there was no result, Paul looked for a reply to his request. Paul must have asked God, 'What are you saying to me?' And God said, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' (2 Cor. 12:8&9)

We often miss God's reply because we don't get the result we asked for.

Habakkuk's first problem (1:2-4)

To try and understand Habakkuk's dilemma I have paraphrased chapter 1: 2-4 : -

'O Lord, how long do I have to keep on dialling your emergency number before you will answer the phone? Violence is taking place all around me but you are not doing anything about it. You are not even listening. Why are you allowing me to see so much wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are everywhere; strife and confrontation are top of the agenda. So, the law becomes a matter of opinion and justice is never seen to be done. The wicked oppress the righteous and, as a result, judgements are twisted, the guilty go free and sometimes it even works the other way ~ the not-guilty are found guilty.' (Hab. 1:2-4 GI paraphrase)

God's first shocking reply

God begins by saying to Habakkuk, 'Your problem is that you are only looking at and thinking about your own nation. You need to look at the nations of the world otherwise you will miss what I am doing!'

I live in the United Kingdom, a place where verbal and physical violence and lawlessness are on the increase and where Christianity continues to decline. So, in order not to be downcast, I don't just engage with the issues in my own nation but I also look at nations in South America, South East Asia, Africa etc. to see where God is more obviously at work today in the growth of the Church and the spread of Christianity.

But then comes the shocking revelation that God says Habakkuk will find difficult to believe. It's unbelievable! We also may find what follows here a problem.

The truth appears to be that God uses nations as his instruments of judgement. And the morality of the nation he uses to execute his judgement can be more questionable, from our human perspective, than that of the nation being judged.

This was Habakkuk's dilemma. How could God use the barbaric Babylonians as his instrument of judgement on Judah? Yes, things were bad in Judah, but the Babylonians were worse, much worse. This doesn't seem right/fair/just.

In the world presently, there are about 32 wars taking place; some are within nations (civil wars) and some between nations. Is God involved in these wars? Is he judging these nations because of their violence, immorality, idolatry etc.? Does God use violence (something which he says he hates) to judge violence? Does what goes around come around?

God indicates that the Babylonians who carry out violence will themselves, in due course, become victims of violence. And, lest we think this is all a bit Old Testament, Jesus said the same thing, 'all who draw the sword will die by the sword.' (Mt. 26:52)

In the recent Hamas–Israel war in Gaza, was God using the terrorists as his instruments of judgement on Israel? And was Israel's response, in doing what they have done in Gaza, God using them to judge the Hamas terrorists?

Inevitably, this makes us all feel uncomfortable but, for me, it illustrates the moral maze that Habakkuk was trying to find his way out of.

There are three things that may help us here:-

1. From God's perspective, there is no-one who is righteous, not one. There are no righteous individuals (except those who are 'in Christ') and certainly no righteous nations.
2. We can't judge because we don't know all the facts. It is said that the first casualty of war is truth. Wars, by their very nature, generate lies. We don't have all the evidence so how can we be judges?
3. As Christians who believe in a perfectly righteous and just God, we acknowledge that this life, taken by itself, is not always fair. This necessitates there being, in the future, a Day of Judgement when all will see that the Judge of all the earth has done what is right and his justice has been vindicated.

Habakkuk's continuing dissatisfaction (1:12-17)

Habakkuk isn't too impressed with what he has heard from God so far, so he continues with his interrogation!

However, it is vital, at this point, to note how Habakkuk's words are coming from a place of deep and personal intimacy with God. His words are neither bitter nor do they arise from a position of self-centred grumbling. Rather, they reflect his burden, his deep concern, his strong faith, as he describes the Lord as 'My God,' 'my Holy One,' 'my Rock'(verse 12). I find this deeply humbling. It seems Habakkuk's intimacy with God arose, at least in part, from his open and honest interrogatory prayer life.

Incidentally, if you are new to interrogatory prayer, I would suggest you start by asking God this question. 'O Lord, is there anything in my life that you don't like and want to change?' (Ps.139:23&24) And then listen out for his reply!

But was Habakkuk wrong about God?

Habakkuk then says something about God that I believe is only partly true i.e. 'Your eyes are too pure to look on evil, you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.' (Verse 13)

Although it is true that God will not tolerate wrongdoing forever, it is not true that God is too pure to look on evil.

For example: In Genesis 6:5 we read, 'The Lord **saw** how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.'

Here are some other verses which show how God sees all that is taking place on the earth – the good the bad, and the ugly. 'For **the eyes of the Lord** range throughout the earth...' (2 Chron 16:9). 'I will **keep my eye** on them for harm and not for good.' (Amos 9:4b) 'I have indeed **seen** the misery of my people in Egypt.' (Ex. 3:7) 'When God **saw** what they did and how they turned from their evil ways...' (Jonah 3:10a).

What's more, when God sees evil it causes him grief and pain. [See Kitamori, K., *Theology of the Pain of God* (Wipf & Stock, 2005)].

However, I think the NIV translation of 1:13 is not helpful. We need to understand the different Hebrew words being used here for 'see' and 'look at.' What I think Habakkuk is saying here in 1:13, if I paraphrase it, is this:-

'God, your eyes are too pure to see ('ra'ah') evil in that you can't keep looking intently ('nabat') or approvingly at evil without doing something about it. You take no pleasure in wrongdoing and those who are treacherous.'

And Habakkuk continues, 'However, there are times when it does appear that you are silent and you do not act on behalf of righteous people but allow the wicked to overcome them.'

Having got all these things off his chest, Habakkuk now withdraws and waits for some answer from God. Maybe he goes up on the ramparts to look out for the advancing Babylonian armies? There certainly seems to be something of a resolute defiance in his attitude. Sometimes, like Habakkuk, we can become stubborn and want to justify ourselves and prove that we are right. In fact, one of the greatest causes of conflict and division between people is the desire to be right! Who is right and who is wrong? Is God right or is he wrong? Is Habakkuk right or is he wrong?

God's second reply (2:2-19)

God begins by asking Habakkuk to write all this down. Happily, Habakkuk obeys otherwise we wouldn't be engaging in this study now!

Then God tells Habakkuk to be patient ~ 'Though it lingers, wait for it' (2:3b). Prophetic fulfilment takes time. It could be days, weeks, months, years, decades, generations, centuries, millennia, before prophecies are fulfilled.

And then God describes how he will judge the Babylonians and why. It is because of their pride, greed, extortion, violence, injustice, immorality, and destruction of animals, lands, and cities. And at the root of all this is idolatry.

Because of these behaviours, God pronounces five 'Woes' on the Babylonians (2:6,9,12, 15 & 19). Chapter 2:6-20 is a taunt-song addressed to the Babylonians.

So, Habakkuk needn't worry; the Babylonians will ultimately get their just desserts ~ what they have done to others will eventually be done to them. The victors will become the vanquished. The victims will become the victorious.

The Hebrew word translated 'Woe' in chapter 2 is 'hoy' (pronounced 'hoh 'ee'). It is an interjection meaning 'Alas' and is used mainly as a denunciation, warning of the distress, calamity and destruction that is about to befall those to whom it is addressed.

Again, this is not just an Old Testament concept. The New Testament equivalent is the Greek word 'ouai', also translated as 'Woe', and used frequently by Jesus.

On one occasion, Jesus said 'Woe' to three cities in Galilee where most of his ministry had been concentrated but where he had generally been rejected. Jesus said: 'Woe to you Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum.' (See Mt. 11:20-24) Today, if you go there, those three cities are ruins; the only Galilean city Jesus didn't pronounce a 'Woe' over is Tiberias, and that is the only city standing there today!

And Jesus also pronounced seven 'Woes' over the teachers of the law and the Pharisees because of their hypocrisy. (See Mt. 23:13-36)

What is it that is transformational in Habakkuk's understanding of God and the circumstances he finds himself in?

As we come now to chapter 3, it is evident that there has been quite a change in Habakkuk's understanding of God and his attitude towards his own circumstances.

His circumstances haven't changed; the way he views them has. This teaches us an important lesson: It is not so much what happens to us that is important. What is key is what we think about what happens to us and how we react.

Chapter 3 is a prophetic psalm ~ a song and a prayer accompanied by stringed instruments.

It is important to understand the tenses of the verbs in this chapter. Unlike the three verb tenses in English, past, present, and future, which are related to time, Hebrew verbs have two tenses, perfect and imperfect, which are related to action. The perfect tense is a completed action whilst the imperfect tense is an incomplete action.

So, in Hebrew thinking, past, present, and future tend to merge. The past lives in the present, as does the future, and the past may be seen in the future and the future in the past. In the Jewish Passover celebrations, the deliverance from Egypt in the past is enacted in the present and there is the anticipation of a future feast. In our Christian Communion services, we also remember the exodus from Egypt, Jesus' death, our deliverance from sin, as well as the future anticipation of drinking wine with Jesus in the Father's kingdom (Mt. 26:29).

So, Habakkuk 3:3 could equally well be translated: 'God **comes** from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory **is covering** the heavens and his praise **filling** the earth.' Rather than: 'God **came** from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory **covered** the heavens and his praise **filled** the earth.'

The whole of chapter 3 is a panoramic view, an entire sweep of God's activities and dealings with his people ~ past, present, and future. This is such a key part of Habakkuk's transformation; he needed to have a much wider and deeper appreciation of God's involvement in the past, the present and the future.

One of the outcomes for Habakkuk was that when he came to see God's dealings in the past, he was filled with awe and wanted them to be repeated in the present i.e., in his day (3:2). We also may want to see God at work among us and through us in ever greater ways, and we can pray towards those ends.

This revelation which Habakkuk had, made God's activities much more alive, immediate, and personal for him. Read through chapter 3 and underline 'His'/'He' in verses 2-7; 'You' in verses 8-15; and 'I'/'Me'/'My' in verses 16-19. Habakkuk moves from the God-centred to the I-centred.

Both are needed if transformation is to take place.

But I close with some ‘gold-nugget’ verses which God had been feeding into Habakkuk throughout this entire prophecy and which must also have been transformational for him. They shine wonderfully against the black background of perplexity, death, destruction, and fearful judgement.

‘Gold-nugget’ 1. ‘The righteous person will live by his faithfulness’ (2:4b).

In its context, this verse encourages Habakkuk that even though the vile, cruel, Babylonians are on their way and he himself may be killed by them, Habakkuk will continue to live with the Lord because of Habakkuk’s righteousness and faithfulness.

This is a great encouragement to our brothers and sisters around the world who are facing threats of various intensities including martyrdom.

This verse is also repeated 3 times in the New Testament. First, in Romans 1:17 where Paul emphasises that it is in the gospel that the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last. Secondly, in Galatians 3:11 where the contrast is between being justified by faith in Jesus and not by works of the law. Thirdly, in Hebrews 10:38 where the call is to persevere in righteous faithfulness when the going gets tough.

‘Gold-nugget’ 2. ‘For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea’ (2:14).

What a wonderful prospect and promise this is! Just imagine the whole earth, including where you live, being filled, not only with the ‘glory of the Lord’ but with the ‘knowledge of the glory of the Lord’ (i.e., a deep, personal awareness).

The glory of the Lord mentioned here contrasts with the vainglory of the Babylonians. Their pride and self-sufficiency will lead to disgrace and they will be filled with shame (2:16).

However, for those with eyes to see, God’s glory **is already** covering the heavens and his praise **is** filling the earth (3:3b). Isaiah also records that ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth **is** full of his glory’ (Is. 6:3).

‘Gold-nugget’ 3. ‘The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him’ (2:20).

In the context of the clamour and noise of war, the perplexity of our circumstances and the many words we use to try and understand God and explain his ways, this verse stands as a stark reminder of God’s sovereignty to

which our response can only be silence. There are times when we simply must put our hands over our mouth, shut up, and surrender to God! This was transformational for Habakkuk as it can also be for us. This mindset then leads us, as it led Habakkuk, to be able to rejoice in all circumstances.

I think the 14th century Persian poet, Hafiz, captures this dilemma well as he sees our relationship with God as being a bit like a game of chess. The poem is called 'Tripping Over Joy.'

'What is the difference
Between your experience of Existence
And that of a saint?

The saint knows
That the spiritual path
Is a sublime chess game with God

And that the Beloved
Has just made such a Fantastic Move

That the saint is now continually
Tripping over Joy
And bursting out in Laughter
And saying, 'I Surrender!'

Whereas, my dear,
I am afraid you still think

You have a thousand serious moves.

'Gold-nugget' 4. '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 tread on the heights' (3:18&19).

There are times when we need to get up, up, and away and see things from above. Whether it was Habakkuk going up into the watchtower or up on the heights, a lot can happen when we take the risk of going higher with God.

Yes, it can make us feel vulnerable as the psalmist discovered: 'When I said, "My foot is slipping," your unfailing love, Lord, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy' (Ps. 94:18&19). So, God gives us a sure-footedness and a joy, even if, or when, there are no other obvious signs of his blessing.

Thus Habakkuk started by bringing his questions and perplexities to God but he ends by singing a song accompanied by a full stringed orchestra! I am reminded of the words of the American poet and children's author, Joan Anglund, who wrote, 'A bird doesn't sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.'

We may not have all the answers but we do and can always have a song of praise in our hearts. This was how it was for Habakkuk ~ the man who clung to God through times of trial and adversity and who continues to speak and sing for us today.

George Irving – May 2024

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