

Habakkuk in One Lesson

(Expository Lesson on the Letter of Habakkuk)

I. Introduction to This Lesson

- a. Habakkuk is a short letter, just three chapters.
- b. It contains one of the most famous and significant lines of the Old Testament.
 - i. This one verse is quoted in three books of the New Testament.
 1. It appears in **Romans 1**, **Galatians 3** and **Hebrews 10**.
 - ii. That verse: **Habakkuk 2:4**, “the righteous will live by faith”.
 - iii. Some have considered it the *theme verse* of both **Romans** and **Hebrews**.
 - iv. However, that one verse is used to introduce two *very different themes* in those two books.
- c. This short book also features a prophet wrestling with God, who is struggling with why the Lord permits certain things to happen. In the course of his wrestling, he asks two very good (but challenging) questions. And he draws some timeless conclusions.
- d. Also, there are a few wonderful lines in this book that I believe every Christian should become familiar with.

II. Historical Context for Habakkuk’s Complaint

- a. While it is hard to pin down a date for this book, we can get a good idea of approximately where it fits into the timeline of Jewish history.
 - i. Habakkuk the prophet is not mentioned in any other book of the Scriptures, except for a brief and highly unusual appearance in the story of the **Bel and the Serpent** (or Dragon) at the end of the long version of **Daniel**, as found in the Septuagint (LXX).
 - ii. Understanding the historical context of this book (what had been going on and what was about to happen) can help us appreciate the significance of what is communicated here.
- b. Near the end of **Deuteronomy**, Moses explains to the Israelites what will happen to them in the future, after he dies. He admonishes them to follow the Lord; and he warns them of what will happen if they do not. This provides a roadmap for much of what follows in the Old Testament.

- i. Read **Deuteronomy 28:15, 28:33-37** and **28:49-52**.
- c. Overall timeline (approximate):
 - i. c. 1400 BC: Moses gave his 'farewell address' (in **Deuteronomy**), shortly before he dies.
 - ii. c. 1000 BC: David was king.
 1. Note that Saul, David and Solomon each reigned for 40 years,
 2. Saul: 1050-1010 BC
 3. David: 1010-970 BC
 4. Solomon: 970-931 BC
 - iii. c. 931 BC: Solomon dies; the kingdom divides into two (Israel in the north and Judah in the south).
 - iv. c. 722 BC: fall of Israel, the northern kingdom, to the Assyrians.
 - v. c. 605 BC: Babylonians take Jerusalem (site of the temple and most prominent city of Judah, in the southern kingdom) for the first time; Daniel and others are taken into captivity.
 - vi. c. 586 BC: fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians.
- d. Conditions in Judah before their defeat and captivity at the hands of the Babylonians.
 - i. Read **2 Chronicles 33:1-9**.
 1. Manasseh, the son of Hezekiah, reigned for 55 years and was incredibly corrupt. (However, he did repent at the end of his life.)
 2. He led Judah to do more sin than even the pagan Canaanites that the Lord had driven out before them!
 - ii. Read **2 Chronicles 36:12-15** and **36:19-29**.
 1. God had sent several prophets (including Habakkuk) to warn the people, again and again. However, the people refused to listen,
 2. Finally, the wrath of the Lord rose up against His people, and Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians.

- e. It should be clear from some of the details in **Habakkuk** that he is writing sometime in the decades before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Since it appears that the Babylonians are not yet on the scene, it seems likely that he was writing sometime in the 600s BC.
 - i. Judah has become a corrupt place, and the Lord says he will raise up the Chaldeans (Babylonians), a people they were unfamiliar with.
 - ii. Babylon is a city, and Chaldea is a region nearby; however, in several places in Scripture, the two terms almost seem to be interchangeable.

III. The Prophet's First Complaint

- a. Read **Habakkuk 1:1-4**.
 - i. I am reading from the Orthodox Study Bible, a translation based on the Septuagint (LXX) text. Since the LXX clearly is the text quoted from by the Hebrews writer in **Hebrews 10:37-38** (compare the LXX text to the Masoretic Text), I strongly encourage you to study this passage in a translation based on the LXX, as well.
- b. Habakkuk's problem, which he sets before the Lord.
 - i. He sees injustice and does not understand why the Lord has not dealt with it.
 - ii. He has been crying out to the Lord about this, with (thus far) no response from God.
 - iii. Ungodly people are dominating and seem to be getting away with it unscathed.
 - iv. The ungodly are oppressing the righteous.
- c. "The righteous" are being oppressed?
 - i. **Question:** Didn't the apostle Paul teach, "There is none righteous, no, not one" in **Romans 3:10**? Where are all these *righteous people* coming from?
 - 1. If the Calvinists are right in their interpretation of **Romans**, God could have answered the prophet here simply, "You fool, *there are no righteous people!* There are only wicked, totally depraved people who are oppressing other totally depraved people".
 - ii. Habakkuk seems to be under the impression that there are righteous people in his day, who are being oppressed by wicked people. And as we will see in the Lord's response, God does not disagree with him!

- iii. Jesus and the apostles spoke of some people being “righteous” after the Fall of Adam and Eve. Note that the term “righteous” does not mean sinless or flawless. However, it certainly refutes the popular idea that all of us are totally depraved, and our only righteousness is the righteousness of Jesus that is imputed to us when we believe. Consider what Jesus and Peter said (which is totally consistent with Habakkuk).
 1. “Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city, that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” (**Matthew 23:34–35**, NKJV)
 2. “...and did not spare the ancient world, but saved Noah, one of eight people, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood on the world of the ungodly; and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly; and delivered righteous Lot, who was oppressed by the filthy conduct of the wicked (for that righteous man, dwelling among them, tormented his righteous soul from day to day by seeing and hearing their lawless deeds)—” (**2 Peter 2:5–8**, NKJV)
- iv. So what about what Paul wrote in **Romans 3**?
 1. Note that Paul’s teaching in **Romans** about righteousness coming by faith is anchored in Habakkuk.
 - a. “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.” (**Romans 1:17**, ESV)
 - i. Note that in NKJV and some other translations, it says, “*the just* shall live by faith”; however, it is the exact same Greek word.
 2. Also note that the famous “no, not one” statement by Paul in **Romans 3** is anchored in a long quote by Paul from **Psalms Psalm 13:1-3** in the LXX. That psalm is designated **Psalms Psalm 14** in Bibles, where the Old Testament translation is based on the Masoretic Text.

- a. If you compare **Romans 3** with the corresponding passages in the LXX and the Masoretic Text (where the text differs significantly), it will become clear that Paul is quoting from the LXX text.
- b. In that psalm, David the author also speaks of the Lord being among “the generation of the righteous”. David certainly did not believe that no men could be called “righteous” as seen in this and other psalms of his.
- c. Also note that in the opening line of that psalm, David makes it clear that the first group of people he is referring to are unrighteous people *who do not believe in God*.

IV. The Lord Responds to Habakkuk’s First Complaint

- a. Read **Habakkuk 1:5-11**.
- b. God responds that He will bring judgment on the wicked people of Judah.
 - i. Their day of reckoning will come!
 - ii. The Lord will raise up the Chaldeans, a ruthless people, to destroy the ungodly people of Judah, capture their fortified cities and take them captive.
 - iii. God will use wicked people as His instruments of justice.
 - iv. It seems to me that the Lord is saying that after the Chaldeans utterly defeat Judah, the Chaldeans will give the credit to their god.

V. Habakkuk Pushes Back in His Response to the Lord

- a. This reminds me of other places in the Old Testament where prophets reasoned with the Lord in prayer, questioning the Lord’s plan.
 - i. Examples include:
 1. Abraham pushed back to the Lord prior to the destruction of Sodom,
 2. Moses appealed to the Lord when the Lord was planning to destroy the nation after the golden calf incident at Mount Sinai,
 3. Job questioned what the Lord was doing to him.
 - ii. The common element: it strikes the prophet that what the Lord is about to do seems to be out of character with His nature (justice, love,

faithfulness in keeping His promises, etc.). Or the plan does not appear to be in God's best interest.

b. Read **Habakkuk 1:12-17**.

- i. Habakkuk complains that this plan of the Lord is not good.
- ii. The Lord, who hates wickedness, is going to let the wicked people (ruthless, pagan, idolatrous Chaldeans) destroy the Jews?
- iii. This is treating the Lord's people like random, leaderless, unprotected fish in the sea who are captured by nets or fishhooks for destruction.
 1. Then the wicked, pagan Chaldean conquerors will offer sacrifices and burn incense to their nets.
 2. This strikes the prophet as unwise and out of character with the Lord's hatred of evil and idolatry.
 3. **Habakkuk's Suggestion:** Wouldn't it be better to provide a good spiritual leader for God's people instead, so they would not be like fish or reptiles, with no leader and no protection? (**Habakkuk 1:14**)
 - a. This reminds me of passages like **John 10** and **Ezekiel 34**, where the Lord says He does not want to leave people "like sheep having no shepherd".
 - b. **Implied Suggestion from Habakkuk to the Lord:** Can't you just provide a *good leader* instead?

VI. The Lord's Dramatic Response

- a. Read **Habakkuk 2:1-4** (from a translation based on the LXX text).
 - i. Habakkuk knows the Lord will answer this challenge. He takes his stand on the rock, watching and waiting for the Lord.
 - ii. The Lord responds, and tells the prophet to write down this response for future generations, something that will come "at the end".
 - iii. In this short passage are two extremely significant verses for Christians.
- b. **First Key Verse:** "...if he should tarry, wait for him. For he will surely come, and he will not tarry." (**Habakkuk 2:3**, LXX, OSB)
 - i. "...if he is late, wait for him, because one coming will be present, and he will not tarry." (**Habakkuk 2:3**, LXX, LES)

- ii. Someone is coming. He is referred to, literally, as the “coming one”. It will seem as if he is taking a long time. However, be assured that this one who is coming will indeed come.
- iii. Does this expression, “the coming one”, remind you of any other Scripture reference?
 1. “And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to Jesus, saying, ‘Are You *the Coming One*, or do we look for another?’” (**Luke 7:19**, NKJV)
- iv. “The coming of the Lord” can refer to either of two events:
 1. His *First Coming*, His advent through His birth in Bethlehem, where He came as a servant to sacrifice His life for us; as well as
 2. His *Second Coming* to judge everyone on the Last Day.
- v. Regarding the Second Coming, it will strike many that “he is taking a long time”, and they will be tempted to abandon the faith.
 1. “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for him and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (**Matthew 24:45–51**, NKJV)
 2. “Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. But while *the bridegroom was delayed*, they all slumbered and slept.” (**Matthew 25:1–5**, NKJV)
 3. “Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one

another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door! My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience. Indeed, we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.” (**James 5:7–11**, NKJV)

4. “Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, ‘Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.’ For this they willfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand,

which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.” (2 Peter 3:1–16, NKJV)

5. Jesus and the apostles warned us that it would seem like a long time that the Coming One would “tarry”. However, we must be vigilant and patient, faithful to the end, and always prepared to depart.
 - a. I think of the picture of the people eating the Passover meal: with sandals on their feet and a staff in their hands (prepared to depart at any moment).
 - b. We are aliens and strangers here, waiting for the Lord’s kingdom to come, and for His return.
- c. **The Second Key Verse:** “My righteous one will live by faith”. (Habakkuk 2:4)
- i. This passage is used by Paul to establish that God’s plan, even revealed by His word in the Old Testament, was that the righteous would live *by faith*, rather than by following the Law of Moses.
 1. “For in [the gospel] the righteousness from God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:17, quoting Habakkuk 2:4).
 - a. (“just” and “righteous” are alternate English translations of the same Greek word)
 2. “Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.” (Galatians 3:11, ESV, also quoting Habakkuk 2:4)
 - ii. The Hebrews writer uses the same passage from Habakkuk, but to make a completely different point in **Hebrews 10**.
 1. Read **Hebrews 10:32-39**.
 - a. The point being made here is that the righteous (or ‘*the just*’, in some translations) will *live by* faith. It is a *way of life*, one that must be maintained over time, until the end.
 - i. It says, “*if anyone draws back* My soul has no pleasure in Him” (Hebrews 10:38, NKJV)
 - ii. This is based on **Habakkuk 2:4** in the LXX. (However, that statement is missing in the

Masoretic Text.) And that phrase contains the *essence of the point* that the **Hebrews** writer is making here, in his quote from **Habakkuk!**

1. [**Personal Story:** Years ago I challenged a group of Bible teachers, “Show *me in your Bibles* the Old Testament passage the Hebrews writer is referring to, where it says ‘if anyone draws back My soul has no pleasure in him’”.
 2. None of them could do it, since it was not in any of their Bibles (where the Old Testament had been translated from the Masoretic Text.
 3. Since I was using a Bible where the Old Testament was translated from the LXX, I could show them where it was, using my Bible!]
 4. This is another example of the benefits of using translations where the Old Testament is from the LXX, in order to recognize what the New Testament writers are referring to!
- b. This passage that states the righteous will live by faith and will not shrink back is the passage that sets up the discussion that follows regarding the importance of being faithful, persevering to the end.
- i. “By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.”
(**Hebrews 11:24–27**, NKJV)
 - ii. This reference to **Habakkuk 2** by the Hebrews writer also ties into the conclusion in **Hebrews 12:1-6**, pointing to the example of Jesus. He endured the suffering on the cross, showing us

by his life what we must be prepared to endure if we are to receive the promised reward.

VII. Other Great Passages in Habakkuk

- a. In **Habakkuk 2:5-20** there are warnings against all kinds of wickedness, including idolatry, violence, plunder, drunkenness, and immorality (looking at exposed bodies, a sin perhaps similar to modern pornography).
- b. Read **Habakkuk 2:19-20**.
 - i. The dumb idols of the world have no life or breath in them. However, in sharp contrast, “the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be reverent before Him” (**Habakkuk 2:20**, LXX, OSB).
 1. A rendering that may be more familiar to many: “But the LORD is in His holy temple. *Let all the earth keep silence before Him.*” (**Habakkuk 2:20**, NKJV)
 - ii. This is a reminder, as well as in the passage that follows in **Habakkuk 3:1-15**, that we must fear God.
 1. Judah is facing the impending judgment of God, a warning that was largely ignored by them.
- c. Read **Habakkuk 3:16-19**.
 - i. The prophet is overcome by the fear of God.
 - ii. The closing to this book is the *very opposite* of the modern so-called ‘prosperity gospel’.
 1. This is a wonderful prayer.
 2. He was not seeking material prosperity; he would be content and rejoice in the Lord in any situation, even in the midst of abject poverty, when everything in this life seems to be going wrong.
 3. It reminds me of how Jesus instructed us to pray: “...give us this day our daily bread”. (**Matthew 6:11**, NKJV)
 4. It also reminds me of Paul’s attitude, being *content in all circumstances*.
 - a. “...I have learned *in whatever state I am, to be content*: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things, I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”
(Philippians 4:10-13, NKJV)

- iii. From Cyprian, bishop of the church in Carthage in North Africa, writing c. 250 AD:
1. “There flourishes with us the strength of hope and the firmness of faith. Among these very ruins of a decaying world our soul is lifted up, and our courage unshaken: our patience is never anything but joyous; and the mind is always secure of its God, even as the Holy Spirit speaks through the prophet, and exhorts us, strengthening with a heavenly word the firmness of our hope and faith. ‘The fig-tree,’ says He, ‘shall not bear fruit, and there shall be no blossom in the vines. The labor 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. But I will rejoice in the Lord, and I will joy in the God of my salvation.’ **(Habakkuk 3:17-19)**
 2. “He says that the man of God and the worshipper of God, depending on the truth of his hope, and Founded on the steadfastness of his faith, is not moved by the attacks of this world and this life. Although the vine should fail, and the olive deceive, and the field parched with grass dying with drought should wither, what is this to Christians? what to God’s servants whom paradise is inviting, whom all the grace and all the abundance of the kingdom of heaven is waiting for?
 3. “They always exult in the Lord, and rejoice and are glad in their God; and the evils and adversities of the world they bravely suffer, because they are looking forward to gifts and prosperities to come: for we who have put off our earthly birth, and are now created and regenerated by the Spirit, and no longer live to the world but to God, shall not receive God’s gifts and promises until we arrive at the presence of God.
 4. “And yet we always ask for the repulse of enemies, and for obtaining showers, and either for the removal or the moderating of adversity; and we pour forth our prayers, and propitiating and appeasing God, we entreat constantly and urgently, day and night, for your peace and salvation.”
 - a. (Source: Cyprian, *Treatises of Cyprian, Treatise No. 5: An Address to Demetrianus*, chapter 20; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 463)

iv. **Closing Challenges:**

1. Let us be content and at peace under all circumstances, INCLUDING even when all around us seems to be going horribly.
2. Always remember that our citizenship is in heaven, and we will eventually receive an eternal reward. This life will be full of “light and momentary afflictions”.
3. We are waiting for “the One who is coming”. He will bring justice and make all things right.