Habakkuk: The Just Shall Live by Faith
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I think the general perception among Christians is that the Minor Prophets are pretty unimportant and irrelevant. That’s one reason why we’ve been doing this study of them and I hope you see how relevant they really are. Habakkuk is, I think, one of the most relevant of all the Minor Prophets today. What Habakkuk struggled with is the same sort of thing we struggle with in our lives. He lived in a time when everything was going wrong. It looked like the world was falling apart all around him. He lived in a time of violence, corruption, hatred, evil, and distress. Sound familiar? Look at the opening verses of the book:

The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw. O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and thou wilt not hear? Or cry to thee “Violence!” and thou wilt not save? Why dost thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble?

Habakkuk lived in that same time period we’ve been looking at for the past few months. The times were evil and Habakkuk was really disturbed by what was going on. Those in power weren’t doing anything to stop it – the ones God had given authority to. In fact, they were the ones who were usually at fault for all the corruption. So Habakkuk took the situation to God in prayer. He knew that God had promised to look after his people. The problem is that after all his prayers, nothing seemed to be happening. Habakkuk is crying out to God: “Where are you? How long do I have to cry out to you for help? You’ve promised to take care of your people, but I don’t see it happening. How long will this go on?”

I think that we’ve all felt like that. I think that in times like our current election season we look at our government and we find ourselves desperately wanting God to take charge of it all. We see terrorism and war, violence and greed around us and we wonder where God is in it all. Nothing seems to be changing. Sometimes we even start to doubt God. Or how often do you pray for unsaved family and friends and yet see nothing happening. How often do we give up because we don’t see immediate answers to our prayers?

So God answers Habakkuk. This is the big difference between Habakkuk and the other prophets. The other prophets recorded God’s words to his people, but in Habakkuk we have a dialogue between the prophet and God. Look at verse five, that’s where God responds:

Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.

Basically God is saying, I’m here and I always have been. I am answering your prayer, you just don’t know how to recognise my answer because you were expecting something else. You weren’t thinking along Godly lines – you were thinking like a man. Here’s what I’m up to:

For lo, I am rousing the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize habitations not their own. Dread and terrible are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Yea, their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. They all come for violence; terror of them goes before them. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport. They laugh at every fortress, for they heap up earth and take it. Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god! (1:6-11)

God’s saying that all this time he’s been working to raise up the Chaldeans – the Babylonians. They’re a godless, pagan, and prideful people who trust only in their own might. They’re the rising threat in the region and an enemy of the Jews. God’s saying that he’s behind the rise of this evil empire. And now Habakkuk’s really confused. I think that in the text there’s a moment of silence while Habakkuk tries to figure out how to respond. He’s been praying for an end to the problems in Judah and now God’s bringing an even bigger problem from the outside. He’s wondering how God’s going to solve the one problem by making another one.

That’s the big problem of our day. I think that all of us have run into people who choose not to believe in God just because they don’t understand how a good God can allow evil to exist or how a good God can supposedly sit idly by while the world goes to hell. They’re thinking that if God can fix everything they see wrong with the world he should do it and do it right now. The problem with that is that they’re thinking in human terms and looking at the little picture. God’s picture is infinitely bigger than we can ever imagine and his ways are beyond our understanding or logic.

This is where Habakkuk is at. But he stops and does something very wise here that can tell us how to deal with the same sorts of situations and questions when they come up in our own lives. First, you’ve got to stop and think about the situation. Don’t just react with your gut instinct or emotions. Don’t panic or become afraid. Stop and think. Think about what you know about God. Step back and look at God’s character, then bring that character back to the problem and you just might realise that God’s really at work – it’s just that he’s not working the way YOU would have done it. And if it still doesn’t make sense to you, Habakkuk’s example reminds us to have faith in God and leave the problem in his hands.

Look at 1:12. Habakkuk does the stop and think bit here:

Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, thou hast ordained them as a judgment; and thou, O Rock, hast established them for chastisement.

Habakkuk reminds himself of what he knows about God. God is eternal and he sits outside of history. He created history and he’s infinitely bigger and more capable than we are. He also is, I think, reminding himself here of the promises God had made to look after his people. God is eternal and unchanging. If he
I find Habakkuk words here pretty peaceful. He doesn’t like the situation, but he’s giving it back to God and he’ll stay prayerful about it. Are we like that, or do we want to hold onto things and get worked up over them? Habakkuk just leaves it with God, then God answers:

And the LORD answered me: “Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end — it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. (2:2-3)

God’s saying that this is something that will happen, but it’s going to take time. He’s telling Habakkuk not to worry about things because he’s got it all under control. “It might look like everything is going wrong, but just wait and be patient and you’ll see me work it all out.” Verse four is one of the most important verses in all of Scripture. God says:

Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fall, but the righteous shall live by his faith. (2:4)

St. Paul repeated those words in Romans and Galatians and so did the author of Hebrews. Those words were what got Martin Luther started. The righteous – the just – will live by faith. Not by circumstances or observations or reasoning, but by faith in God who makes his promises to us.

It all comes down to this principle. Either you live by faith, trusting in God, or you live trusting in the reason and power of man. Everyone fits into one of those two categories. Either you put your whole trust in God and grab hold of his promises — and keep trusting in him even when things look really bad — or you rely solely on your own reason and human wisdom. That’s what’s wrong with the world — too many people trust in themselves. Think about how foolish that is. On one hand you’ve got, well, you. You’ve been around the block a few times. You went to college. You’re not dumb, after all. But then on the other hand you’ve got the almighty God who created the universe and who is omnipotent and omniscient. I don’t think it takes a genius to figure out who is a more qualified object of faith!

But then how many of us as Christians end up still relying on ourselves or on the ways of the world and other people just like us? How often, like the Jews, do we forget to rely on God and put our trust in things that aren’t God. Maybe we put our trust in our brokerage account and mutual funds, or we put our trust in the government, or in our education, or maybe even in our own family. That’s not what God calls us to do. Those things are important, but when we substitute them for God we deny the very faith that brings us to God’s grace! I encourage you to read Hebrews 11 this week. It’s the faith hall of fame in the Bible. Read about the Old Testament saints who put their trust in God – not in things or situations or people – but in trusting God they changed the world.

In the rest of chapter two, God explains to Habakkuk that he isn’t just going to let things slide with the Chaldeans. He knows they’re an evil and godless people and they will be punished for all that. We don’t have time tonight to go through that passage in detail, but God uses it to assure Habakkuk that not only will he look after his own, he will also punish evil.

In chapter three we have Habakkuk’s final prayer. He’s got his answer. Now he realises that the God of history is moving and has it all under control. He understands – and so should we – that we won’t understand the problem just by looking at the immediate situation. God has the bigger picture in mind. But ultimately what we see here is that the problems we encounter are really solved only by the relationship of man to God. It begins in 2:20:

But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.

And then his prayer:

O LORD, I have heard the report of thee, and thy work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years renew it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy. (3:2)

Remember that when Habakkuk started out he was asking God to do something. Now he’s asking God not to go overboard. He’s reminding God that he is a God of mercy – in the middle of all this judgement and punishment, he wants God to remember mercy.

Habakkuk’s prayer is reminder that our faith in God is not blind. God hasn’t just made promises to his people; he’s kept the promises he’s made. He’s proved his faithfulness over and over and over throughout history and we can bank on God’s continuing faithfulness. That’s what our faith rests on. I agree that it would be questionable to ask someone to have faith in a god who hasn’t done anything to demonstrate his love for us, but that’s not a problem we have to worry out. Look at Habakkuk’s prayer:

God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory
covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise. Selah
His brightness was like the light, rays flashed from his hand; and there he veiled his power. [Remember how God saved his people from Egypt?] Before him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind. He stood and measured the earth; he looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered, the everlasting hills sank low. His ways were as of old. (3:3-6)

And remember how God saved his people at the Red Sea?

the deep gave forth its voice, it lifted its hands on high. (3:10)

And how he stopped the Sun and Moon at Joshua’s request:

The sun and moon stood still in their habitation (3:11)

This is the God we have; a good who acts in history to look after his children. Habakkuk sees the greatness of God and he concludes in verse 16:

I hear, and my body trembles, my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones, my steps totter beneath me. I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.

Habakkuk had no doubts about the coming problems, but he also had no doubts after all this about the need to rest on the faithfulness of God:

Though the fig tree do 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 joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like hinds’ feet, he makes me tread upon my high places. (3:17-19)

Is that where you’re at right now? Are you at the point where you can see all the problems and pressures around you and yet be able to lay your problems and concerns on God and have faith that he’ll do what he promised? Look at the peace and joy that you can read between the lines in Habakkuk prayer. I can say from first hand experience that it’s amazing the peace and joy you find when you are able to lay your cares on God. We should be saying with Habakkuk that the “Lord is our strength.” That’s the great principle of the New Testament where Christ ultimately becomes our strength as his sacrifice saves us from the consequences of our sins. But in the ins and outs of our daily lives, God is also our strength in the more mundane things. Maybe you’re concerned about the problem of domestic terrorism. Maybe there are relational problems you’re going through at home. Maybe things aren’t going well at work or maybe you don’t have work. Maybe you’re concerned about health issues, God doesn’t make the problems go away all the time. That’s what the world tells us needs to happen. That’s what the world is always trying to do – to take away the problem. What we learn from Habakkuk is that God has ordained the problem and it’s in his control. He’s using it for our benefit – maybe we don’t see it right now, but if we trust in him we’ll ultimately understand. Remember Jesus words in St. John’s Gospel:

In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” (16:33)

That’s what we need to remember. God is in control. We don’t need to worry about how to deal with the difficulties of life, we need to get on with living out life in the triumph of faith!