

# Habakkuk 1 - Habakkuk Questions God; God Answers

## I. Habakkuk's dialogue with God (Hab 1:1—2:20)

### (1) First question and answer session (1:1-11)

(A) Habakkuk's question: How can God permit Judah's covenant unfaithfulness?

(1:2-4)

(a) Title (1:1)

(b) Habakkuk's distress (1:2-4)

(i) Unanswered prayer (1:2)

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(B) God's answer: God would use Babylon to judge Judah (1:5-11)

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## Habakkuk 1

### I. Habakkuk's dialogue with God (Hab 1:1—2:20)

#### (1) First question and answer session (1:1-11)

(A) Habakkuk's question: How can God permit Judah's covenant unfaithfulness?

(1:2-4)

(a) Title (1:1)

1 The **pronouncement** which Habakkuk the prophet saw:

1 The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.

1 The pronouncement that the prophet Habakkuk perceived.

1 The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see.

— "...pronouncement" - *massah*, burden; an oracle or heavy message

— Habakkuk described this book as a "pronouncement" that he saw in a vision or a dream

(b) Habakkuk's distress (1:2-4)

(i) Unanswered prayer (1:2)

**2 How long**, LORD, have I called for help, And You do not hear? I cry out to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save.

**2** How long, O LORD, will I call for help, And You will not hear? I cry out to You, "Violence!" Yet You do not save.

2 "How long, LORD, must I cry out for help, but you won't listen? I'm crying out to you, 'Violence!' but you aren't providing deliverance.

2 O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save!

- Habakkuk has two basic complaints:

- "How long" - Habakkuk has prayed many times over the sinfulness of Judah, especially the sin of "violence" but God never seemed to answer

— Habakkuk asked the Lord how much longer he would have to pray before the Lord responded Cf. 2:6; Ex 16:28; Num 14:11)

— God hears all prayers because He is omniscient, but Habakkuk complained that God had not given evidence of His hearing by responding to his prayer

— God had seemingly not heard, and He certainly had not helped the prophet. Not hearing is equivalent to not helping.

(ii) Judah's covenant violations (1:3-4)

**3 Why** do You make me see **disaster**, And make *me* look at **destitution**? Yes, **devastation** and **violence** are before me; **Strife** exists and contention arises.

3 Why do You make me see iniquity, And cause *me* to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; Strife exists and contention arises.

3 Why are you forcing me to look at iniquity and to stare at wickedness? Social havoc and oppression are all around me; there are legal conflicts, and disputes abound.

3 Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention.

- "Why" - the second complaint was that, to make things worse, everywhere God led Habakkuk, he saw an increase in sin:

- "...disaster" - iniquity, which is moral evil with some tragic results

- "...destitution" - perverseness

- "...devastation" - destruction, which is greed and cruel plundering (Cf. 2:17)

- "...violence" - *hāmās*, means more than just physical brutality. It refers to flagrant violation of moral law by which someone injures his fellowman (Cf. Gen 6:11). It is any ethical wrong, and physical violence is only one manifestation of it.

- "...strife" - controversy, dispute

- Habakkuk wanted to know why God allowed these sins—that he had to observe every day—to continue in Judah. These sins were not only common, they were increasing, yet *Yahweh* did nothing about the situation.

It is clear that Habakkuk developed a genuine sensitivity to sin. If he is surrounded by it, he does not understand why God does not seem to do anything about it. The more he prays that sin would decrease, the more he sees sin increase.

This is not an instance of the earthen vessel finding fault with the Potter who made it—an attitude rebuked by Isaiah and Paul. It is to the one who answers back in unbelief that Paul says, 'Who indeed are you ... to argue with God?' (Rom 9:20). But there are others who answer back in faith; their words, when they do so, are the expression of their loyalty to God.

4 Therefore **the Law is ignored**, And **justice is never upheld**. For the wicked surround the **righteous**; Therefore justice comes out confused.

4 Therefore the law is ignored And justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore justice comes out perverted.

4 Therefore, the Law has become paralyzed, and justice never comes about. Because criminals outnumber the righteous, whenever judgments are issued, they come out crooked."

4 Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.

- "...the Law is ignored" - since God had not intervened to stem the tide of evil, as He had threatened to do in the Mosaic Law, the Judeans were ignoring His Law.

- "...justice is never upheld" - justice was perverted, as demonstrated that the wicked seemed to be victorious over the righteous

— They did not practice justice in their courts, the wicked dominated the righteous, and the powerful perverted justice. These conditions were common in Judah.

- "...righteous" - singular, a collection of items all of the same kind; refers to a community

— In order to survive the depravation and spiraling society we live in, we must stand as and in a community of believers

These are the prophet's complaints: "How long can God continue to tolerate sin among His people?" and "Why is He tolerating it when His silence seems to be making matters worse?"

(B) God's answer: God would use Babylon to judge Judah (1:5-11)

(a) Judgment to come through the Babylonians (1:5)

**5 "Look among the nations!"** Watch! Be horrified! Be frightened speechless! For *I am* accomplishing a work **in your days**— You would not believe *it* even if you were told!

**5 "Look among the nations!"** Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because *I am* doing something in your days— You would not believe if you were told.

**5 "Look out at the nations and pay attention!"** Be astounded! Be really astounded! Because something is happening in your lifetime that you won't believe, even if it were described down to the smallest detail.

**5 Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you.**

- Though God had not responded to the prophet's questions previously, He did eventually, and Habakkuk recorded His answer

- God states His intentions here...He did not intend to tolerate the sins of the people forever

- "Look among the nations!" - the LORD told Habakkuk and his people to direct their attention away from what was happening in Judah, to what was happening in the larger arena of ancient Near Eastern activity

- They were to observe something there that would astonish them and make them marvel. They would see that God was doing something in their days that they would not believe—even if someone had just told them about it.

- "...in your days" - not some distant future prophecy, but one that God would carry out in Habakkuk's generation

- Prophets had to be verified by near prophecies before their far prophecies could be trusted. The rise of Babylon to empire status in their day verified that Habakkuk was what he claimed to be: a prophet of God.

- If any other man had said that Babylon would be an empire again, it would never have been believed. Babylon had long since been defeated by the Assyrians, so who would expect Babylon to defeat the Assyrians and rise out of their obscurity.

The Apostle Paul, quoting from the LXX on this verse, applies the principle of God's dealings in Habakkuk's day to the situation in the church in his own day (Acts 13:41). No doubt God's work of calling the Gentiles into his church would be just as astonishing as his work of using the Babylonian armies to punish Judah.

Today the world asks, 'Why doesn't God do something about sin?' My friend, God has done something about it! About 2000 years ago He gave His Son to die. He intruded into the affairs of the world. And He says that He is going to intrude again in the affairs of the world —yet today the world goes merrily along picking daisies and having a good time in sin. But God is moving.

(b) Babylonians described (1:6-11)

6 "For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, That **grim** and **impetuous** people **Who march throughout the earth**, To **take possession of dwelling places that are not theirs**.

6 "For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, That fierce and impetuous people Who march throughout the earth To seize dwelling places which are not theirs.

6 Watch out! For I am bringing in the Chaldeans, that cruel and impetuous people, who sweep across the earth "dispossessing people from homes not their own.

6 For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs.

- The LORD urged the prophet and his people to see that He was in the process of raising up the Chaldeans as a force and power in their world

— The Neo-Babylonian Empire began its rise to world domination with the accession of Nabopolassar to the throne of Babylon in 626 BC. This aggressive king stimulated the Babylonians into becoming a ruthless and impetuous nation that—by Habakkuk's time—had already marched throughout the ancient Near East and conquered several neighboring nations (Cf. Ezek 28:7; 30:11; 31:12; 32:12).

— Babylon, God revealed, would be the rod of God's punishment of Judah, as Assyria had been His instrument of judgment of Israel

- "...grim" - bitter; emphasizes their cruelty to subjugated nations

- "...impetuous" - emphasizes the speed of conquest by which the Babylonians would be characterized

- "...Who march throughout the earth"- the prerogative of their empire status

- "...take possession of dwelling places that are not theirs" - they would conquer foreign territory by breaking their alliances

7 "They are terrifying and feared; Their justice and authority originate with themselves.

7 "They are dreaded and feared; Their justice and authority originate with themselves.

7 They are terrible and fearsome; their brand of justice and sense of honor derive only from themselves!

7 They are terrible and dreadful: their judgment and their dignity shall proceed of themselves.

- The Babylonians were independent people and they thought they did not have to rely on any nation other than themselves

— They lived by rules that they made up, rather than those that were customary at the time.

— The Jews of Habakkuk's day did not believe that God would allow the Gentiles to overrun their nation (Cf. Jer 5:12; 6:14; 7:1-34; 8:11; Lam 4:12; Amos 6), yet their law and their prophets warned them that this could happen (Cf. Deut 28:49-50; 1 Kings 11:14,23; Jer 4; 5:14-17; 6:22-30; Amos 6:14)

8 "Their horses are faster than leopards, And quicker than wolves in the evening. Their horsemen charge along, Their horsemen come from afar; They fly like an eagle swooping down to devour.

8 "Their horses are swifter than leopards And keener than wolves in the evening. Their horsemen come galloping, Their horsemen come from afar; They fly like an eagle swooping down to devour.

8 Their horses are swifter than leopards, and more cunning than wolves that attack at night. Their horsemen are galloping as they approach from far away. They swoop in like ravenous vultures.

8 Their horses also are swifter than the leopards, and are more fierce than the evening wolves: and their horsemen shall spread themselves, and their horsemen shall come from far; they shall fly as the eagle that hasteth to eat.

- The military armaments of the Babylonians were state of the art: their horses were the swiftest, and they were more eager to attack their enemies than wolves (Cf. Jer. 5:6)

— Their mounted soldiers swooped down on their enemies, as fast and unsuspected as an eagle (or vulture), diving from the sky to devour a small animal on the ground (Cf. Deut 28:49; Jer 5:17; Lam 4:19)

— All three of these animals—that God used for comparison with the Babylonians—were excellent hunters, fast, and fierce

9 "All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces moves forward. They gather captives like sand.

9 "All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces *moves* forward. They collect captives like sand.

9 "They all come to oppress— hordes of them, their faces pressing onward— they take prisoners as numerous as the desert sand!

9 They shall come all for violence: their faces shall sup up as the east wind, and they shall gather the captivity as the sand.

- The Babylonians loved violence. The faces of their warriors showed their love for battle, as they moved irresistibly forward in conquest.

- They were as effective at collecting captives from other countries as the sirocco (hot desert) winds from the East were at driving sand before them (Cf. Jer 18:17; Ezek 17:10; 19:12; Jonah 4:8)

— Nothing seemed to be able to stop their ease of conquest; they set a direction and nothing forced them to turn around

— This enemy was advancing like a whirlwind, and gathering captives as innumerable as the grains of sand

10 "They make fun of kings, And dignitaries are *an object of* laughter to them. They laugh at every fortress, Then heap up dirt and capture it.

10 "They mock at kings And rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress And heap up rubble to capture it.

10 They make fun of kings, deriding those who rule. They laugh at all of the fortified places, constructing ramps to seize them.

10 And they shall scoff at the kings, and the princes shall be a scorn unto them: they shall deride every strong hold; for they shall heap dust, and take it.

- The kings and rulers of the lands that the Babylonians overran were no threat to them. They laughed at them and their fortified cities in contempt (Cf. 2 Kings 25:7).

— They heaped up dirt to capture fortifications. They did not need special machines, but used whatever materials they found, with which to build siege ramps to conquer these cities (Cf. 2 Sam 20:15; 2 Kings 19:32; Ezek 4:2; 21:22; 26:8-9).

11 "Then they fly along *like* the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, **They whose strength is their god.**"

11 "Then they will sweep through *like* the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, They whose strength is their god."

11 Then like the wind sweeping by they will pass through— they're guilty because they say their power is their god."

11 Then shall his mind change, and he shall pass over, and offend, imputing this his power unto his god.

- "...They whose strength is their god" - the ultimate object of Babylonian worship will be their own power and might, but this would also be their downfall

— The principle here is that sin is self-destructive and always carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction

To summarize the first dialogue, Habakkuk complained about Judah's sinfulness and questioned how God could tolerate this sinfulness. He had a problem with the deep-seated violence within Judah. God answered that He was not going to tolerate it, but would very shortly raise up the Babylonians to punish Judah. However, that answer gave Habakkuk even greater problems than he had before, and led to a second dialogue

(2) Second question and answer session (Hab 1:12—2:20)

(A) Habakkuk's question: How can God use the less righteous Babylon to judge Judah? (1:12-17)

(a) Babylonians' iniquity (1:12-13)

12 Are You not from time everlasting, LORD, my God, my Holy One? **We will not die.** You, LORD, have appointed them to *deliver* judgment; And You, O Rock, have destined them to punish.

12 Are You not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge; And You, O Rock, have established them to correct.

12 "Haven't you existed forever, LORD my God, my Holy One? We won't die! LORD, you've prepared them for judgment; Rock, you've sentenced them to correction.

12 Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die. O LORD, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction.

- "...We will not die" - Habakkuk is confident that God's judgment upon Judah will not be their extermination; the Jews would not be totally destroyed because of God's holiness.

— Habakkuk now recognized the place of Babylon in the program and plan of God. He understood God's two-fold plan: "judgment" and "punish" (correction), not total destruction

— Judah would go into exile because of idolatry, but while in exile she would be cured from her idolatry

13 *Your* eyes are too pure to look at evil, And You cannot look at harm *favorably*. Why do You look *favorably* At those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up Those more righteous than they?

13 *Your* eyes are too pure to approve evil, And You can not look on wickedness *with favor*. Why do You look with favor On those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up Those more righteous than they?

13 Your eyes are too pure to gaze upon evil; and you cannot tolerate wickedness. So why do you tolerate the treacherous? And why do you stay silent while the wicked devour those who are more righteous than they are?

13 Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?

- Because Yahweh was the Holy One (v12), Habakkuk knew that He was too pure to look approvingly at evil, nor could He favor wickedness. This was a basic tenet of Israel's faith (Cf. Ps 5:4; 34:16,21).

— But this raised another, more serious, problem in the prophet's mind: Why did the LORD then look approvingly on the treachery of the Babylonians? Why did He not reprove them and restrain them when the Babylonians slaughtered people who were more righteous than they were? Why did the godly remnant in Judah have to suffer with their ungodly Judean neighbors?

The prophet's first question (v2-4) arose out of an apparent inconsistency between God's actions and His character. He was a just God, but He was allowing sin in His people to go unpunished. His second question arose out of the same apparent inconsistency. Yahweh was a just God, but He was allowing terrible sinners to succeed and even permitted them to punish less serious sinners. These questions evidenced perplexed faith rather than weak faith. Clearly Habakkuk had strong faith in God, but how God was exercising His sovereignty baffled him.

Habakkuk takes his place beside many others, such as Job (Job 7:16-21; 9:21-24; 12:4-6; 21:1-16, 21-25; 27:1-12), the psalmist Asaph (Ps 73), Jeremiah (Jer 11:18-19; 12:1-4; 15:15-18; 17:15-18; 20:7-18), and Malachi (Mal 2:17), who questioned God as to His fairness in handling the problems of evil and injustice.

It is one thing to face the problems that confront everyone who believes in a good and omnipotent God and ask why things are so, or how they can be so. It is something quite different to question the Divine goodness or justice, or the very existence of God, simply because one cannot answer these questions.

(b) Babylonians' injustices (1:14-15)

14 *Why have You made people like the fish of the sea, Like crawling things that have no ruler over them?*

14 *Why have You made men like the fish of the sea, Like creeping things without a ruler over them?*

14 *"You have fashioned mankind like fish in the ocean, like creeping things that have no ruler.*

14 *And makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them?*

- Habakkuk asked the LORD why He had made people like fish and other sea creatures that apparently have no ruler over them who restrains them

— This statement probably represents the prophet's most pointed accusation against the Almighty. In recognizing the sovereignty of God among the nations, he must conclude that God himself is ultimately behind this massive maltreatment of humanity.

15 *The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook, Drag them away with their net, And gather them together in their fishing net. Therefore they rejoice and are joyful.*

15 *The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook, Drag them away with their net, And gather them together in their fishing net. Therefore they rejoice and are glad.*

15 *The adversary captures them with a hook, gathering them up in a fishing net. He collects them with a dragnet, rejoicing and gloating over his catch.*

15 They take up all of them with the angle, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their drag: therefore they rejoice and are glad.

- Babylon was like a fisherman, who took other nations captive with a hook and a net, and rejoiced over his good catch

— Babylonian monuments depict the Chaldeans as having driven a hook through the lower lip of their captives and stringing them single file, like fish on a line

(c) Babylonians' idolatry (1:16-17)

16 Therefore they offer a sacrifice to their net And burn incense to their fishing net, Because through these things their catch is large, And their food is plentiful.

16 Therefore they offer a sacrifice to their net And burn incense to their fishing net; Because through these things their catch is large, And their food is plentiful.

16 Therefore he sacrifices to his fishing net, and burns incense in the presence of his dragnet, because by them his assets increase and he gets plenty of food.

16 Therefore they sacrifice unto their net, and burn incense unto their drag; because by them their portion is fat, and their meat plenteous.

- In another Babylonian relief sculpture, the Chaldeans pictured their major gods dragging a net in which their captured enemies squirmed

- The Babylonians even worshipped and gave credit to the tools they used to make their impressive conquests, rather than crediting *Yahweh* (Cf. v11)

— They had as little regard for human life as fishermen have for fish. That God would allow this to continue seemed blatantly unjust to Habakkuk.

17 Will they therefore empty their net, And continually slay nations without sparing?

17 Will they therefore empty their net And continually slay nations without sparing?

17 Is he to continue to empty his fishing net? Will he ever stop killing entire nations without mercy?"

17 Shall they therefore empty their net, and not spare continually to slay the nations?

- Now Habakkuk is really struggling! "God, you can't be serious! You can't use *them!* *They are even worse than we are...*"

— Habakkuk finished his question by asking the LORD if the Babylonians would continue to carry on their evil practices without sparing anyone

— Yahweh's policy of not interfering with Babylon's wickedness baffled Habakkuk more than His policy of not interfering with Judah's wickedness

— It was Yahweh's use of a nation that practiced such excessive violence to judge the sins of His people that Habakkuk could not understand