

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

How Long O Lord?

December 9th, 2012

Habakkuk

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to the Book of Habakkuk. Last week I mentioned that the structure of Micah is so complicated that we would be biting off more than we could chew if we tried to preach on the book as a whole – well with Habakkuk that is not the case. The Book of Habakkuk is built around two questions, two answers and a song of response. The difficult in Habakkuk is not the structure it is the theology. Habakkuk asks BIG questions and God answers with PROFOUND truth. This is a big boy book and God's people have been wrestling with it for 2600 years.

We don't know too much about Habakkuk, though many scholars believe that he was a professional temple prophet who was also a singer. Musical prophets existed in the Old Testament, in fact we read about them last week in 1 Chronicles 25.

¹Moreover David and the captains of the army separated for the service *some* of the sons of Asaph ... who *should* prophesy with harps, stringed instruments, and cymbals. (1 Chronicles 25:1. NKJV)

It seems that Habakkuk may have been one of these musical prophets associated with the Levites and the temple. Far more important than the biography of the prophet is the need to understand the historical circumstances that gave rise to his questions. Habakkuk wrote this book around 609 B.C. He lived two generations after the Assyrian slaughter of Northern Israel which we spoke about last week. Micah and Isaiah had been successful in instigating a revival in Judah – the Southern Kingdom – that had resulted in a reprieve being offered by Almighty God. Judah did not suffer the fate of the Northern Kingdom because her people repented. Assyria collapsed around the walls of Jerusalem and limped home only to disappear from history. But that generation, the generation of the revival had now died out and a new generation had grown up and they had forgotten the price of sin, they had forgotten the mercy and the wrath of God and in just one generation they had returned to the sin and stupidity of their grandparents. Habakkuk is concerned. Habakkuk knows that if the Southern Kingdom falls into the same sort of apostasy that the Northern Kingdom fell into then she will experience the same fate at the hands of her Covenant God. It is this concern which gives rise to Habakkuk’s first question. The prophet asks the Lord:

Question 1: Why do you delay in punishing wickedness among your people?

Look at 1:2-4:

- ² O LORD, how long shall I cry,
And You will not hear?
Even cry out to You, “Violence!”
And You will not save.
- ³ Why do You show me iniquity,
And cause *me* to see trouble?
For plundering and violence *are* before me;
There is strife, and contention arises.
- ⁴ Therefore the law is powerless,
And justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
Therefore perverse judgment proceeds. (Habakkuk 1:2-4. NKJV)

The prophet cries out to God and says: “O God! You’ve given me eyes to see and a mind to perceive but all I see is violence and wickedness among your people! There is strife and division, they have made your word powerless and there is no living justly, there is only sin and perversity because the wicked outnumber the righteous! Why are you standing on the sidelines God? Why will you not show up to punish the wicked and cast them out from among your people?”

It is very hard to be a prophet of the Lord during a time of apostasy and ruin. Habakkuk was a contemporary of Jeremiah who earned the nickname “the weeping prophet”. It’s hard to be happy as a prophet when all you can see with your prophetic insight is wickedness and heresy among God’s people. Everybody wants to go to church and hear a happy message: “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life!” “God wants to prosper you and expand your territory!” “God wants to give you your best life now!” Those are the messages everyone wants to hear and they flock to churches where prophets will give them those messages. But the true prophet whose eyes can do nothing but see the truth can do nothing but mourn and lament. Jesus, by the way, sided with the prophets of mourning:

⁴ Blessed *are* those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4. NKJV)

Habakkuk knows what he sees and he remembers his history and that makes him very concerned about the fate of God’s people. If you have any kind of spiritual discernment and if you remember anything of Biblical history than it is very hard in seasons of extreme apostasy to preach happy and uplifting messages and Habakkuk is cracking under the strain. “How long O Lord? Why don’t you send revival, why don’t you send a plague to wipe out the sinners from among your house, why don’t you do something because if you leave us to ourselves we will whistle and lie our way into total ruin and we will invite the catastrophic wrath of a Holy God!”

That is a good question and it is one the real prophets are asking again as they mourn over God’s people. They look at the church and they see the sin and the stupid and the old heresies we rejected generations ago and they wonder, “How long O Lord? How long can this can go on? How long can Christ be blasphemed among the nations because of the conduct of God’s so-called covenant people?” It was a good question then, and it is a good question now. God answered the prophet and this is what he said:

Answer 1: Look among the nations and watch

Look at 1:5-6:

- ⁵ “Look among the nations and watch—
 Be utterly astounded!
 For *I will* work a work in your days
 Which you would not believe, though it were told *you*.
- ⁶ For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans,
 A bitter and hasty nation
 Which marches through the breadth of the earth,
 To possess dwelling places *that are* not theirs. (Habakkuk 1:5-6. NKJV)

God’s answer to the prophet is that he is already preparing chastisement. He says look among the nations and watch. I am raising up the Chaldeans – the Chaldeans were just another name for the people more commonly known as the Babylonians. God’s answer to the sinfulness of God’s people is to raise up a new world power known for their brutality and pride. He is raising up a rod of punishment for the backside of his own people. By the way, the reason this terrified the prophet is because God had done this before. Two generations ago God told a prophet:

- ⁵ Ah, Assyria, the rod of my anger—
 the club in their hands is my fury! (Isaiah 10:5. NRSV)

God told the prophet Isaiah that he would punish Northern Israel by raising up a rod of chastisement – the Assyrians – and applying it liberally to the backside of his people. Habakkuk has seen this movie before and he is now terrified. He wanted a mild rebuke, maybe a nice plague or some locusts or an economic depression but God knows that the sin in his people is too far gone for that. Surgery is required. Life threatening major surgery. God is going to do through the Babylonians what two generations before he had done through the Assyrians. That terrible news gives rise to the prophet’s second question:

Question 2: Why do you use wicked agency to chastise your own people?

The prophet cannot believe that the Holy God of the Universe will dirty his hands by using people like the Babylonians to accomplish his Sovereign purpose. Look at 1:12-13:

- ¹² Are You not from everlasting,
 O LORD my God, my Holy One?
 We shall not die.
 O LORD, You have appointed them for judgment;
 O Rock, You have marked them for correction.
- ¹³ *You are* of purer eyes than to behold evil,
 And cannot look on wickedness.
 Why do You look on those who deal treacherously,

*And hold Your tongue when the wicked devours
A person more righteous than he? (Habakkuk 1:12-13. NKJV)*

Is it fair or right for God to use wicked people to punish and purify his own children? That is a very good question. You see there is no question that he does, he doesn't hide the fact, he publicly proclaims it. God said in Isaiah: "I raised up the Assyrians for my purpose." God says here: "I am raising up Babylon for my purpose". And it's not just in the Old Testament that God says this, in the Book of Revelation we have the four horsemen of the Apocalypse who are table setters for the final execution of God's purposes on the earth with respect to wrath and redemption. The first horse, the white horse, represents the rise and fall of empire. The horse who goes forth to conquer. Old Testament and New, when God has a purpose to effect, he generally does it by a change in global empire. And the empire that arises is often an evil empire. And so God's people have been asking for almost 3000 years, is this right for God to do? Is it JUST and GOOD that God uses evil agency to accomplish his purposes upon the earth?

Well, thankfully, God answers that good question. Look at 2:2ff:

Answer 2: In the end the proud will fall but the just shall live by faith

²Then the LORD answered me and said:

“Write the vision

And make *it* plain on tablets,
That he may run who reads it.

³ For the vision *is* yet for an appointed time;
But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie.
Though it tarries, wait for it;
Because it will surely come,
It will not tarry.

⁴ “Behold the proud,
His soul is not upright in him;
But the just shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:2-4. NKJV)

There are a few things we need to say about this answer and the first comes from verse 2 where God says: “write the vision, make it plain on tablets”. That is an unusual command. Prophets normally did not carve their visions onto stone tablets, they normally wrote them on papyrus or parchment, the ancient equivalent of paper, but Habakkuk is told to carve them on stone. The reason given is that there will be considerable delay between prophesy and fulfilment with respect to this evil agent. God is saying: wait. Justice will be done in the long run and Babylon

will be punished for her evil deeds but you may not live to see it. In fact if the scholars are right who tell us that this was written in 609 B.C. then it was in fact 70 years exactly before Babylon would fall to the Medo-Persians. One full human lifetime. In one full human lifetime, Babylon would rise, serve God's purpose and then fall before God's justice and God tells the prophet: "You may only live to see the front end of this process, and so it may look unfair to you, but in the end, justice will be done. Wait for it and believe in it."

God goes on to detail the judgment that will befall Babylon. He says in 2:8:

⁸ Because you have plundered many nations,
All the remnant of the people shall plunder you (Habakkuk 2:8. NKJV)

And that of course is exactly what happened. Babylon arose in history like a bat out of hell, she conquered and plundered nations and then in one human lifetime, about the amount of time that America has ruled over the earth, in a moment of indolence and unwariness, she fell to her enemies who literally snuck in under her sleeping nose and she receded into history with a whimper. The once mighty lion who ruled over the earth in enormous pride and arrogance, fell into the ashes with a thud. All the people she had plundered, plundered her. What comes around goes around. The justice of God is exact. In contemporary terms this would be as if the American Empire which began about one human lifetime ago in 1945 with the blast of a nuclear bomb should end in 2015 with the same. That's not a prophesy by the way, that is just a contemporary comparison. God uses human empires and then visits their evil upon them in a time of his own choosing. That is how God works and it has vexed God's people terribly for nearly 3000 years.

God's answer to Habakkuk's question was perhaps not as detailed as we would have liked. He didn't really answer the vexing philosophical questions behind the question which is why God's people are still very vexed. Our grandparents still struggled with this issue in their day. When the original Baptist Confession was written in 1689 AD, they still had no solid answer to this question so they simply drew a line around it. They said:

God hath decreed in himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things, whatsoever comes to pass;¹**yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin** nor hath fellowship with any therein;² nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, **nor yet is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established;**³ in which appears His wisdom in

disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree. (The Baptist Confession 1689, Chapter 3, Paragraph 1)

Our grandparents thought it wise to simply state both sides of the tension. God is Sovereign over all things that come to pass. If Babylon rose up to punish God's people and to send them into exile it was because God willed it to be so. And yet he is not thereby the author of all the evil that the Babylonians did. When they raped and murdered it was not that God made them do so. They were rapists and murderers by wilful nature and God merely turned their wilful tendencies towards his own purpose. He used them without doing violence to their will and in using them did not devolve them of moral responsibility but rather actually established it. And he did this, our grandparents said, in a way that displays his superior wisdom in the disposition of all things according to his purpose. That's a long and very wise way of saying "we really don't know how this works, we just know that's the way it is, that's how God does it and God is just in all he does."

The proud and the wicked may serve God's Sovereign purpose but in the end, they do not escape his justice, but rather their own wicked deeds are visited upon their heads. The judge of all things will do right. God knows how to punish the wicked.

And, the prophet is told, God knows how to preserve a faithful remnant within the Day of Wrath. That is a consistent theme within the Bible. God's wrath is real but in his wrath God remembers to be merciful towards his faithful few. The proud will be consumed by God's anger, but the just shall live by faith. The Apostle Peter said it this way; he references the day of Noah with the ark and the day of Sodom and Gomorrah and the family of Lot and then he says:

⁹then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment ¹⁰—especially those who indulge their flesh in depraved lust, and who despise authority. (2 Peter 2:9-10. NRSV)

God knows how to rescue a remnant in the Day of Wrath. It doesn't mean you won't get wet, but it does mean you will not perish in the flood.

The Book of Habakkuk reminds us that the wrath and mercy of God are never severed. Even in this season of mercy that we are enjoying now, this age of grace, God is still working out purposes of wrath upon the earth – the Bible says that:

¹⁸For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, (Romans 1:18. NKJV)

God is revealing wrath against ungodliness all throughout history Paul says. There are seasons when the emphasis is on mercy, but the note of wrath is never silent. Paul says that God visits iniquity upon men by exposing them to the natural consequences of their own rebellion, saying later in the chapter:

²⁷Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due. (Romans 1:27. NKJV)

There has never been a time when the wrath of God was totally muted in favour of his mercy and neither will there ever be a time when the mercy of God is muted in favour of his wrath. Peter promises that and before him, Habakkuk prays for it:

In wrath remember mercy. (Habakkuk 3:2. NKJV)

God had already promised that he would:

But the just shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4. NKJV)

I wish I could tell you whether that means that in the Day of Wrath God will supernaturally preserve a remnant of his faithful physically from all of the political and environmental events that are foretold or whether it means he will preserve them spiritually, i.e. he will preserve them through death and safely into eternity. I don't know; the passage seems intentionally ambiguous. What I do know is that even in the season of God's ultimate wrath, he remembers mercy and he preserves a remnant of his people. The just shall live by faith. Additionally, this answer of God gives me hope that many will flee God's wrath and join this remnant. Look at 2:14; in the middle of the description of the day of wrath, God says this:

¹⁴ For the earth will be filled
With the knowledge of the glory of the LORD,
As the waters cover the sea. (Habakkuk 2:14. NKJV)

The prophet is told that the Day of Wrath will cut through the idolatry and apathy of the fallen world and people will see and know the glory of the Lord – the earth will be FULL of the knowledge of the Lord as waters cover the sea. The Book of Revelation picks up this same theme. It says that all the catastrophic events associated with the final Great Day of Wrath will serve to empty the middle ground. Many will join the remnant. They will take upon themselves the Mark of the Lamb and they will attract the wrath of the beast. Others will flee the centre and join the camp of the beast and take his number and they shall bear for all eternity the terrible wrath of the lamb. The Day of Wrath serves to empty the middle ground. Everyone will know the Lord. Some will love him, some will hate him but no one will be ignorant of his ways.

Responding With The Prophets

Now, obviously, the Day of Wrath that Habakkuk foresaw has come and gone in history. Babylon rose and Babylon fell over 2500 years ago but the principles he discovered in his conversation with God continue to be in force and in fact a great deal of the content and theology from Habakkuk is repeated and recast in the New Testament. The fall of ancient Babylon actually becomes the dominant interpretive lens for anticipating the fall of ultimate Babylon in the Great and Final Day of Wrath as described in the Book of Revelation. I preached on that at an evening service last year and have put copies of that message at the Welcome Centre and Guest Central if you are interested. God is today and will be again tomorrow exactly who he was in the time of Habakkuk. God doesn't change. And so I want to conclude our time by looking quickly at the response of Habakkuk and also the recommended response from 2 Peter who covers much of this same ground. Looking first at Habakkuk chapter 3 we see that we need to respond to these truths by:

1. Remembering our redemption

In the prophet's song of response he revisits the Exodus in order to anticipate and stir up faith in God's future deliverance. Look quickly at 3:15:

¹⁵ You walked through the sea with Your horses,
Through the heap of great waters. (Habakkuk 3:15. NKJV)

As God did to the Egyptians so he will do to the Babylonians! He can visit wrath upon the wicked and redemption upon the remnant through the very same mighty waters of judgment; he did it before and he can do it again!

The best way to prepare for the Great Day of Wrath is actually by remembering the Day of our Redemption. When Jesus hung upon the cross all looked lost; all was dark and evil appeared to triumph. But after three days, everything changed. Humiliation and defeat turned to triumph and exaltation as Christ arose and ascended to the Father's right hand. Remember that because the Day of Wrath will bring seeming defeat to God's people, but we above all others know that death is not always loss and humiliation is often a prelude to exaltation. Revelation 11 promises this very thing.

⁷When they finish their testimony, the beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit will make war against them, overcome them, and kill them. ⁸And their dead bodies *will lie* in the street of the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified.... ¹¹Now after the three-and-a-half days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and great fear fell on those who saw them. ¹²And they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, "Come up here." And they ascended to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies saw them. (Revelation 11:7-12. NKJV)

The prophet John talking about the Great Day of Wrath says that the people of the beast rejoice because they think they have utterly defeated and killed the people of the lamb – their body – the body of the church – lies dead in the streets of the great city of man for three days and all rejoice! But then when all looks lost GOD SPEAKS and the breath of life enters them and they arise and ascend into glory. The best way to endure the Day of Wrath is to remember the Day of Redemption because the same Lord who conquered the grave holds your soul in the palm of his hand.

Secondly we respond to these truths by:

2. Determining our status

Peter says it this way:

¹⁴Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, **be diligent to be found by Him in peace** (2 Peter 3:14. NKJV)

If all this is true, that a fire storm from heaven is going to fall on the earth in the Great Day of Wrath that will simultaneously punish the wicked while the righteous are preserved unto eternity, it is super ridiculously important that you know what side of this equation you fall on. When God shows up on his white horse with all the armies of heaven at his side, that is not a good day to have mud on your team jersey. Make sure you are and are known as one of those just who will be living by faith. The Apostle Paul put it this way:

⁵Examine yourselves *as to* whether you are in the faith. (2 Corinthians 13:5. NKJV)

Don't think that just because you FEEL like you are in that you are in. Remember that Jesus said, "Many will say to me Lord, Lord and I will say I never knew you". (Matthew 7:21-23) Many people FEEL IN who are NOT IN. Examine yourself. Be diligent to be found by Him in peace. Only a fool or an atheist would leave here today after hearing what you have heard without being absolutely sure that they are saved. Be diligent to be found by him in peace.

Thirdly we respond to these truths by:

3. Guarding our perseverance

Peter says:

¹⁷You therefore, beloved, since you know *this* beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked (2 Peter 3:17. NKJV)

The best way to guard our perseverance is to eliminate deceptive influences. If you want to be on the right side of the coming equation you need to rigorously root out of your life the deceptive influences of the enemy. Be very careful what books you are reading and what mega church pastors you are listening to. I worry when I see how many of our women are avid readers of Joyce Meyers and how many of our people like to watch Joel Osteen on TV – those are not the sort of influences that are going to help you guard your perseverance. The Day of Wrath is going to require more than power thoughts and happy words from God's people. I'm not saying those people work for the enemy but at the very least their ridiculous teaching is eroding authentic faith in God's people, whether wilfully or just stupidly I cannot and care not to say. But be careful.

Beware lest you fall from your own steadfastness. Feed your soul with more substantial fare if you want to partner in your perseverance. Lastly we respond to these truths by:

4. Growing in grace and knowledge

Peter says:

¹⁸but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him *be* the glory both now and forever. Amen. (2 Peter 3:18. NKJV)

Christianity is like swimming against the current. The only way to make sure you are pointed in the right direction when God shows up is to keep swimming upstream. Grow. Grow in grace and knowledge. That is why I am so concerned with this seeker church, perpetual merge lane nonsense where church is always for the newcomer never for the disciple. You need to grow. You can't take one Sunday off. You can't go to the cottage for the summer and expect not to lose your kids and lose your soul. It is arrogance to think that we don't need this; that we don't need teaching, we don't need God to speak to us; that once we're "saved", once we've said the prayer or got our ticket that we have received all we need from God. The Bible says a truly saved person would never think that way. A truly saved person wants to grow as far away from sin and as close to God in Christ as humanly and spiritually possible. Don't ever stop growing in grace and knowledge. Press on to know the Lord.

To Him be the glory, both now and forever more. Amen.