

Habakkuk 1

Asking God the Hard Questions: Pain, Hope, and Us

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the context of Habakkuk
- Examine the hard questions Habakkuk was struggling with
- Discuss how to seek hope and truth in God in the midst of a broken and painful world

Pray for your time together as a group.

? How do you feel about the state of the world today? How does this affect how you interact with others? How does this affect how you interact with God?

Background and Introduction to Habakkuk

Who wrote it: The prophet Habakkuk

Where it was written: Judah

When it was written: Between 612 B.C. and 588 B.C.

Habakkuk was a prophet in a time when Israel and Judah's pattern of faithlessness toward God was well-established. The two kingdoms had split from being a single, unified kingdom several kings ago; while the kings of Judah followed God more consistently, both kingdoms were in a spiral of disobedience and distraction away from God. Babylon was increasing in influence and power, and Habakkuk could see both the rising danger from without the kingdom and the growing evil and complacency within it. His questions to God carry a powerful tone of sincerity and pain that resonates with all those who see evil in the world today and struggle to understand why a good God allows things to be as they are.

"Habakkuk lived in Judah during the reign of Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:36–24:5). He prophesied between the fall of Nineveh (the capital of Assyria) in 612 B.C. and the Babylonian invasion of Judah in 588 B.C. . . . This book records the prophet's dialogue with God concerning the questions, 'Why does God seem indifferent in the face of evil? Why do evil people seem to go unpunished?' While other prophetic books brought God's word to people, this brought people's questions to God." (*Life Application Study Bible, New International Version, published by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. in Wheaton, Illinois and Zondervan Publishing House in Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1991. Study note on Habakkuk 1:1, page 1588*)

Habakkuk 1:1-4 (NIV)

¹The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

²How long, Lord, must I call for help,
but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, "Violence!"
but you do not save?

³Why do you make me look at injustice?
Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are before me;
there is strife, and conflict abounds.

⁴Therefore the law is paralyzed,
and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.

The name "Habakkuk" means "to embrace strongly". This can have the feeling of a heartfelt hug—or the connotation of wrestling with something. In this book Habakkuk lives up to his name as he struggles with deep questions with God.

? In both the King James Version and the American Standard Version, the word used in verse 1 is translated as "burden" rather than "prophecy." How does this show Habakkuk's questions in a different light?

Possible answers: Habakkuk felt for his community; he was closely tied to their successes and failures, their joys and pains. This "burden" can make Habakkuk more relatable. Prophets can seem powerful and like they know more than others do; but here Habakkuk is asking difficult questions instead of giving sure answers.

? Do you feel burdened by your city's ills? How can Habakkuk be an example to you as you consider how to address these struggles?

Possible Answers: When our neighbors are suffering and led astray, we can imitate Habakkuk as we grieve, pray, question in faith, and listen in wait for God's response.

? Verse 3 says "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?" How do you grapple with knowing God doesn't do evil things, yet bad things happen?

Possible Answers: These answers will vary. It's sometimes tempting to believe that evil is a karma-like result of our and others' actions. At other times it's tempting to believe that God is sitting idly by. In the end, faith and trust in God are the only answers we can cling to, because we don't know everything, and He does.

Habakkuk 1:5-11 (NIV)

⁵ “Look at the nations and watch—
and be utterly amazed.
For I am going to do something in your days
that you would not believe,
even if you were told.
⁶ I am raising up the Babylonians,
that ruthless and impetuous people,
who sweep across the whole earth
to seize dwellings not their own.
⁷ They are a feared and dreaded people;
they are a law to themselves
and promote their own honor.
⁸ Their horses are swifter than leopards,
fiercer than wolves at dusk.
Their cavalry gallops headlong;
their horsemen come from afar.
They fly like an eagle swooping to devour;
⁹ they all come intent on violence.
Their hordes advance like a desert wind
and gather prisoners like sand.
¹⁰ They mock kings
and scoff at rulers.
They laugh at all fortified cities;
by building earthen ramps they capture them.
¹¹ Then they sweep past like the wind and go on—
guilty people, whose own strength is their god.”

? What is God’s response to Habakkuk’s complaint from verses 1-4 and what stands out about it?

Possible answers: God tells Habakkuk that he is going to raise up the Babylonians to invade Judah and overcome it. God doesn’t justify himself to Habakkuk. He doesn’t lay out his timeline to get Habakkuk’s approval or thoughts. But he does respond to Habakkuk that things are going to change, and that those watching will “be utterly amazed.” God does not seem annoyed or irritated at Habakkuk’s questions. Instead he speaks with and to Habakkuk about how he’s feeling and promises that change is coming.

Leader’s Note: The next two questions aim to prevent people from distancing themselves from the example of the Israelites who needed correction. We are all sinful and selfish. Small group members should look at the passage from both the perspective of the ones calling for justice and the ones needing mercy.

? How do you feel when you think of yourself in the context of God's justice against wrongdoing?

Whom do you relate to in this passage?

Possible Answers: God's justice is powerful to save, and is encouraging as I think of myself as belonging to God. God's justice is powerful to destroy, and is frightening as I think of myself as a sinful human being. It's easier to think of myself as a powerful conqueror, or a person safely watching events unfold from a distance. It's harder to think of myself as one of the people facing the sharp end of the sword.

2 Peter 3:9 (NIV)

⁹The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Read Out Loud: God's timing doesn't seem to make sense to us at times, but he has a reason for what he does and when he does it. He wants to give everyone a chance to be saved, but: justice is coming. There will be an end. Are you ready?

Habakkuk 1:12-17 (NIV)

¹²Lord, are you not from everlasting?

My God, my Holy One, you will never die.

You, Lord, have appointed them to execute judgment;

you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish.

¹³Your eyes are too pure to look on evil;

you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.

Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?

Why are you silent while the wicked

swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

¹⁴You have made people like the fish in the sea,

like the sea creatures that have no ruler.

¹⁵The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks,

he catches them in his net,

he gathers them up in his dragnet;

and so he rejoices and is glad.

¹⁶Therefore he sacrifices to his net

and burns incense to his dragnet,

for by his net he lives in luxury

and enjoys the choicest food.

¹⁷Is he to keep on emptying his net,

destroying nations without mercy?

? What do we learn about the character of Habakkuk through his questions and response to God?

Possible answers: Habakkuk knows God's character, and that God is good. He is choosing to go to God to wrestle with things he doesn't understand rather than withdrawing or renouncing God.

? What do we learn about God through his response to Habakkuk?

Possible Answers: God listens and answers, but not necessarily how we think he should or will. He will deal with evil.

A Tiny Look Ahead: Habakkuk is not done speaking in the last verse of chapter 1.

Habakkuk 2:1 (NIV)

¹I will stand at my watch
and station myself on the ramparts;
I will look to see what he will say to me,
and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

? What feeling do you get about Habakkuk's attitude toward God in this verse?

Possible Answers: Habakkuk isn't hopeless; he hasn't given up on God's goodness. He expects God will reply.

A Big Look Ahead: As believers, we have more knowledge and hope available to us than Habakkuk saw.

Acts 4:24-31 (NIV)

²⁴When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

"Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
²⁶The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.'

²⁷Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. ²⁹Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to

Speak your word with great boldness. ³⁰Stretch out your hand to heal and perform signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

³¹After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.

? How does this passage from Acts fit with what you’ve just read in Habakkuk 1? How does it feel different?

Possible Answers: This fits with the suffering and evil that Habakkuk saw, since it persists in the world and rises and falls in different times. However, the difference is that the hope we have is more apparent in these verses. The believers asked God not to stop the evil in the world, but instead to imbue his followers with courage, miraculous power, and love in Jesus’ name.

? What is the hope that we have as believers, despite the evil that people do around us?

Possible Answers: God is victorious. We may suffer or see others suffer, but we know it is temporary and that God will work good through His power and will.

For Discussion and Accountability

? What questions are you grappling with that you want to ask of God? How can you be seeking Him in your pain and uncertainty this week?

? What do you do and/or feel when you have to wait on God’s answers to the tough questions in life?