

# Route 66

## *Habakkuk: Trusting Through Trials*

Part 35 – April 25, 2010

There are two ways to pronounce today's prophet: [huh-BAK-kuk] or [HAB-uh-kukk]; both are legitimate (it's a tomato/tomoto thing).

Dear Habby is unique among the prophets. Instead of taking God's message to the people, he takes *his* message to *God*. And this little three-chapter book records their dialog. He begins by venting frustration and questioning God's wisdom.

How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. – *Habakkuk 1:2-3 NIV*

He's talking about his homeland of Judah (the *southern* kingdom).



These are the 19 kings of Judah and their years of reign (starting with Solomon's son and ending at the exile). The blue names are the ones who, "did right in the eyes of God".

Habakkuk enters at the tail-end of the reign of Judah's *last* righteous king: Josiah. That puts him in the "yellow dot" section with some interesting company.

**Daniel**, who was taken as a teenager to Babylon in the *first* exile, and served in the royal palace of Nebuchadnezzar.

**Ezekiel**, who was taken at the age of 25 in the *second* exile (of 10,000 Jews) and ministered among the group of forced Jewish laborers in Babylon.

And **Jeremiah**, the weeping prophet who actually lived through the destruction of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians.



Now, King Josiah went to *incredible* lengths to stamp out idolatry and to reinstate the covenant; but, the best he was able to accomplish was to impose a *surface level* morality. And when he died in battle, the undercurrent of sin immediately swept the nation back into their same old habits: idolatry, greed, violence, oppression, and injustice.

Habakkuk saw his nation seemingly transform under Josiah; but, now he's watching all of the righteous reforms unravel. And, he can't comprehend how God could just stand by and do nothing. In despair and desperation he cries out his frustration; which is *not* uncommon in scripture. What *is* unusual is that God answers. Even more unique: Habakkuk doesn't like the answer!



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. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who [will] sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. - *Habakkuk 1:5-7a NIV*

The Babylonians had been enslaved by the Assyrians for 200 years. But, in 612<sup>BC</sup> Nebuchadnezzar's father led a coalition revolt that crushed the Assyrian capitol of Nineveh (as Nahum prophesied). Having brought down the greatest superpower on earth, they set his sights on world domination; and the Babylonians rose from a nation of slaves to the world's new superpower in just 15 years!

And now God says that their rise to power is part of *His* plan!

The Lord says, "You want action? You're about to get it! Judah will be destroyed by this pagan powerhouse for her persistent pattern of ongoing, unremorseful sin and rebellion!" And Habakkuk goes, "Whoa! Whoa! Just ... hold on a minute!"

O Lord, are you not from everlasting? - *Habakkuk 1:12 NIV*

In other words: "Who are you and what have you done with my God?"

When it comes to helping us find truth and life and glory, and keeping us safely in the path of righteousness and in a right relationship with Him, the Lord has two basic options: *internal voice* or *external force*. With the great gift of free will, He *is* a bit limited. And, if we allow our hearts to become too calloused to be swayed by *our* conscience or *His* Spirit He *will* employ outside influences.

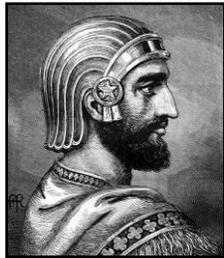
But, Habakkuk argues God's decision. It seems so unfair! The Babylonians are *worse* sinners than the Jews! Why would God use the *more-sinful* to punish the *less-sinful*?

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? - *Habakkuk 1:13 NIV*

I love how “The Message” treats this passage:

But you can't be serious! You can't condone evil! So why don't you do something about this? Why are you silent now? This outrage! Evil men swallow up the righteous and you stand around and watch! – *Habakkuk 1:13 TM*

Habakkuk accuses God of creating men like directionless fish, and then allows unholy nations to catch them in their nets, even though they'll end up worshipping and sacrificing to the net!



Cyrus the Great

And the Lord says, “You done?” And, Habakkuk hears that God will use Babylon to correct Judah (and put her back on course). And then Babylon will be utterly blotted out for her crimes against God and humanity. And she was by Cyrus the Great, 539<sup>BC</sup>. And waiting to greet Cyrus was that 200 year old prophecy from Isaiah, welcoming the conqueror by *name!* (We discussed all of this in Ezra.) The rise and fall of Babylon lasted a mere 73 years!

So, God ends the argument by affirming His sovereign majesty:

... the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him. – *Habakkuk 2:20 NIV*

Habakkuk wasn't afraid to tell God exactly how he felt, and God certainly wasn't offended by his honesty. However, the Lord isn't going to answer Habakkuk's questions or defend His own decisions. And Habakkuk is left with this tension of a sovereign, loving God who is going to allow an evil nation to prosper and His own people to suffer greatly.

What's so fascinating here is Habakkuk *himself*. The prophet *is* the project! And we get to watch his internal struggle.

It's an internal conflict that all of us have or will grapple with: can a good God allow - or even cause - pain? There are two distinctly different types who inflict pain.



For instance, if you went into an alley, and a guy in a mask knocked you out, stabbed you, and took your money, he would be in the category of those who want to harm.



However, if you checked into a hospital, and a guy in a mask knocked you out, stabbed you, and took your money, he would be in the category of those who want to heal.

Habakkuk's challenge (and *ours*) is to trust that God resides in the second category; and He even works *pro bono!* No matter how intense my suffering becomes, I must trust that: God is a surgeon, not a sadist!

He's forced to do His work without disturbing our free will.

And the suffering can actually be *worse* with the *surgeon*, because a sadist can lose interest or take pity. But the surgeon's pity dedicates him to continue until the operation is complete!

What do people mean when they say, "I am not afraid of God because I know He is good"? Have they never been to a dentist? - C.S. Lewis, "A Grief Observed"

God *always* has my, and all of humanity's, *eternal* best in mind. We were never promised a pain-free life. The promise is that *His will* will be done through *me*, and that I'll *never* be forsaken, and that His presence and grace will be sufficient.

Habakkuk was still terrified at the prospect of the Babylonians.

I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. - Habakkuk 3:16a NIV

But, he has been reminded of God's holy character and nature, and he turns his conclusion into a Psalm of worship.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. - Habakkuk 3:17-18 NIV

This isn't merely *resignation* about the things over which he has no control; the object of his joy is the God of his salvation! He thought his job was to *understand* the Lord, but he comes to realize that his job is to *trust* the Lord. We can't always understand but we can always trust.

And the key to Habakkuk's revelation comes in a short statement made by the Lord in the midst of their argument.

... the righteous will live by his faith ... - Habakkuk 2:4 NIV

When those trials come and I have a hard time trusting, I shouldn't squander my time arguing with God; instead, I should work to gain a better appreciation of his character.

Because it's often at those times when it feels like He's *least* at work in my life that He's actually *most* at work in my life, drilling out decay and filling the cavities.

He is in control, working out His own good purpose in His own perfect time. And at best we can only comprehend a small portion at any given point. So, He wants us to get to where Habakkuk got: to the place where we can honestly say, "Though I lose everything I have in this world, yet I will rejoice in Your presence and Your grace!"