

### Life Group Study Guide

Habakkuk—carefully, reverently, prayerfully considered-- will change our lives. Its opening verses are a waterfall of grace and blessing that leave us in awe of God's work in bringing us salvation. This study is based on a sermon preached Sunday morning at WEFC entitled:

***Wonder and Be Astounded*** and reflects on **Habakkuk 1:1-11**.

**Before you begin:** Take some time as a group to *pray* that God would be at work in your minds and hearts. There is a real difference between knowing and understanding something intellectually and having a heart that is deeply affected by the truth. Pray that the Holy Spirit will help you to *understand* God's word, *welcome* it into your heart, and then *apply* it faithfully to your lives.

#### **Habakkuk 1:1-11 (ESV):**

*The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.*

#### ***Habakkuk's Complaint***

<sup>2</sup> O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not hear?

Or cry to you "Violence!"  
and you will not save?

<sup>3</sup> Why do you make me see iniquity,  
and why do you idly look at wrong?  
Destruction and violence are before me;  
strife and contention arise.

<sup>4</sup> So the law is paralyzed,  
and justice never goes forth.  
For the wicked surround the righteous;  
so justice goes forth perverted.

#### ***The LORD's Answer***

<sup>5</sup> "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.*

<sup>6</sup> For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,  
that bitter and hasty nation,  
who march through the breadth of the earth,  
to seize dwellings not their own.

<sup>7</sup> They are dreaded and fearsome;  
their justice and dignity go forth from  
themselves.

<sup>8</sup> Their horses are swifter than leopards,  
more fierce than the evening wolves;  
their horsemen press proudly on.

Their horsemen come from afar;  
they fly like an eagle swift to devour.

<sup>9</sup> They all come for violence,  
all their faces forward.  
They gather captives like sand.

<sup>10</sup> At kings they scoff,  
and at rulers they laugh.

They laugh at every fortress,  
for they pile up earth and take it.

<sup>11</sup> Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,  
guilty men, whose own might is their god!"

Habakkuk asks BIG questions, and God gives UNEXPECTED answers. Right from the start (v.1), we see this is a little book of enormous consequence: "The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw." The word "oracle" can be translated as "burden" or "word." It's a word that's figurative, a weighty word. We might translate **verse 1**, "The heavy, burdensome word that Habakkuk the prophet saw." God has made Habakkuk see things, and in response, he has hefty, substantial questions.

Just consider the topics covered in Habakkuk's short three chapters: Habakkuk is built around two questions, two answers, and a song of response. The **first** question and answer have to do with *theocracy* (**Hab. 1:1-11**). A theocracy is a form of government that is led by God. Habakkuk is wondering, God if you're really ruling over your people, then why don't you do something about all the sin in our midst. The **second** question and answer wrestle with *theodicy* (**Hab. 1:12-2:20**). Theodicy is a branch of philosophy dealing with the issue of evil in light of the existence of God. If God is just, holy, good, and all-powerful, then why is there evil and misery in the world? **Thirdly** and finally, the book culminates and gives way to a kind of *theophany*. A theophany is a manifestation of God in the Bible that is tangible to the human senses. In its most restrictive sense, it's a visible appearance of God in the Old Testament. Habakkuk does not experience that kind of theophany, but as he describes God in light of revelation, he absolutely experiences God in a tangible, even sensory way (**Hab. 3:16; cf. Job 42:1-6**). By the end of this book, Habakkuk is a changed person. Are you open to having God change you through this study of Habakkuk?

**Habakkuk 3:19** concludes, "*To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.*" We don't know too much about Habakkuk, but many scholars believe he was a musical temple prophet associated with the Levites (cf. **1 Chron. 25:1**). Habakkuk reads like a collection of psalms. It begins like many of the lament psalms, *How long O LORD, shall I cry for help* (**Hab. 1:1; cf. Ps. 6:3, 10:1, 13:1, 38:9-11, 130:1**), and ends like many of the praise psalms "*I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation*" (**Hab. 3:18-19; cf. Ps. 9:2, 35:9, 118:24**). Almost the entire book of Habakkuk is poetry. Why do you think there is so much poetry in the Old Testament (**Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Most of the Prophets**)?

### 1) Groaning at Injustice (Read **Hab. 1:2-4**)

Habakkuk is a man whose heart is breaking, and it breaks with prayer. He's asking God, "Why do you delay in punishing wickedness among your people?" 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 all around! There is strife and division. *How long* are you going to stand on the sidelines God? *Why* will you not show up to punish the wicked and cast them out from among us?" Aren't those the questions we all want to know in times of injustice and suffering? *How long? Why?* (cf. **Num. 14:27; Job. 19:7 Jer. 31:22; Mark 9:19; Rev. 6:10**).

There's nothing sinful about crying upward to God and making your complaint known to him, but is there a difference between grumbling and groaning (cf. **Num. 14:1-3, 11-12; Ex. 3:9**)? What is Habakkuk doing, grumbling or groaning?

Habakkuk's heart is breaking over **three** specific things (**v.4**):

i) He's concerned that **God's Word is numb** among the people. He says, "*the law is paralyzed.*" "Lord, what is happening to your Word among your people? It seems to have lost all its power."

ii) He's concerned because **God's ways are neglected**. He says, "*Justice never goes forth.*" "Lord, what has happened to your ways seems the people despise them. "

iii) He's concerned because **the wicked outnumber the righteous**. "*The wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.*" "Lord, there's no fairness; the righteous are left frustrated by the wicked?"

He's opening up the Jerusalem daily news, and every day it's filled with stories of people not getting justice in the courts, they're not hearing God's Word from the prophets, and the wicked are prospering.

It's easy to look around the world, in our country and abroad, at war, injustice, exploitation, sorrow, death, and so on, and see the mess out there. Concerning our culture, God's word doesn't exist, God's ways are not honoured, truth is perverted, and sin is celebrated. However, I don't think that's the point of our text. Habakkuk is not talking about the outside world. He's speaking about the people of God. He groans because the Word is failing to rise up and work within the church. Among the covenant community, he says, "Our ways are further and further away from our calling, and the justice we ought to be bringing." The vulnerable ones get abused, and nobody does anything! Even worse, justice gets perverted so that the victim is made to feel like a nuisance, and the law-breaker prospers! That's Habakkuk's complaint. Could that message bear any significance for evangelicalism today? Does what goes on in the church ever make you groan and cry out, "O Lord, how long before we see your winnowing fork thresh within your own people?" **Discuss.**

## 2) Gasping at the Inexplicable

God answers in a way that surely must have been shocking to Habakkuk. If you thought the situation in Israel was bad, just wait until you hear the solution. In **verses 5-6**, God says,

<sup>5</sup> "*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.* <sup>6</sup> *For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own.*

Effectively God answers Habakkuk by saying, 'You think the evil and violence is bad now? You haven't seen anything yet,' which is an unusual answer. He's been crying out, 'O God, deliver us, deliver us!' God replies, 'Not only will I not deliver you, but it will also get way worse than it is now.' God intends to raise up the Chaldeans, an utterly pagan, godless people, to come in and punish all of Israel for their sin. (The Chaldeans is just another name for the Babylonians, who the Bible describes as a prideful and brutal people.)

As Christians, we need to remember that God may be doing something that is utterly hidden from us. Habakkuk thinks God doesn't hear his prayers, but God's answering them, just in a completely unexpected way. The humbling truth is that God has his own plans and timetable. He wants Habakkuk and the people of Judah to "*wonder and be astounded*" that the way they see

things going is not the way He sees things going. And what they think is happening is not what God is doing.

Habakkuk ministered when Israel as a nation was descending into greater and greater sin. No doubt, he longed for revival among God's people, but God answered the opposite. He tells Habakkuk that he intends to use the Babylonians like a wooden spoon on the backside of his people. He's "*raising up the Chaldeans*," they aren't at full strength yet, but when they are, he's going to bring them down swift and hard, three times, on the children of God. The first time will be in 605 B.C., God's people will be defeated, and a train of captives, including Daniel and his friends, will be carried off into exile in Babylon. Then, again in 597 B.C., Israel gets defeated, and another group, including Ezekiel, goes into exile. And then finally, in 587 B.C., the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, the temple, and the monarchy, and the only people still alive at the end of it will also be carried off into exile, which lasted for 70 years.

That's what Habakkuk saw. <sup>5</sup> "*Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. Do I have your attention Habakkuk? Because I've heard your complaint, and I'm going to reveal my holy character now, but not in salvation, in judgement.*"

*"I'm raising them up... that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own <sup>7</sup> They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. <sup>8</sup> Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. <sup>9</sup> They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. <sup>10</sup> At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. <sup>11</sup> Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!" (Hab. 1:7-11)*

This was an incomprehensible thing for the people of God to believe at the time. Tantamount to God saying today, I'm going to raise up, a nation of radical religious terrorists to wipe out the church and the only Christians still alive will be living as deportees in foreign refugee camps. I mean, it's unfathomable! After all, Israel had the covenant at Sinai, the temple where God dwelled, and God promised David that his offspring would sit on the throne forever. God was obligated to save them and preserve them in the land, was he not? No. God never promised to preserve idolatrous people. Israel loved other gods. We know from **Ezekiel** that they loved the temple, but not Yahweh, who was in the temple. They loved the land, but not Yahweh, who gave them the land. So, God destroyed the temple and sent them out of the land, and then they only had him. Sure, they suffered, but it ushered in a whole new era of true worship in the life of Israel. Do we love our church buildings, or our stuff, more than the one who gave them to us?

We all like to prescribe our own answers to our own prayers. We pray, and in the back of our mind, we say, "God, in case You're stuck for a plan...you could always show mercy, or bless me, or protect me and so on." But we forget that God sometimes makes things an awful lot worse before they get any better. God may do the opposite of what we expect, and it might look like

the backside of a Persian rug to you right now, but on the other side, the side that God sees, it's a beautiful, glorious tapestry. A grand design that tiles the way for the coming of the Messiah and his eternal kingdom. That might not be what your prayer request was about, but it's always a factor as he knits your prayers into his unfolding plans for the world and his people.

### 3) Grappling in the Inward Heart

I'm not an Old Testament prophet; I'm certainly not Habakkuk. I haven't received a word from the Lord to explain everything that's going on with all these waves of Covid-19, or Russia at war with Ukraine, or anything else. But here's what I know from history and God's Word: God is a God of salvation and judgment. I do not know how, or if, God might bring judgment on our culture or our churches today. I won't venture forth any guesses on that front, though Lord knows He has plenty of reasons to do it. I'm simply saying, as you read history, one of the striking things about the difference between our age and, say, the 18<sup>th</sup> century is they were often having days of fasting and repentance and prayer. And they would see in military defeat, plagues, or the low-waning spiritual health of a country; they would see in those things the Lord's judgment. And I do think there is a danger in that way of thinking. We don't have a divine, inspired interpretation to know what God is doing. But surely, we're missing something by not having the category at all.

When we come across judgement passages in the Bible, we should take them to heart, and be sober about these things, and knowing our own times we ought to reflect inwardly and repent.

In **Luke 13:1-5**, they came to Jesus questioning, 'Why did the tower of Siloam fall on those people? And why did Pilate mingle the blood of that Galilean group with their idols? Were these worse sinners than other people? Did they do something wrong? And Jesus skips right past that. He says, no, I'm not going to judge the merits and demerits of that sinner versus that sinner. All I'm going to say is, *"unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."*

In **Acts 13: 38-41**, Paul and Barnabas are preaching at Pisidian Antioch, not to pagans but to Jews. They were preaching to men of Israel, to children of Abraham, and they said:

*"Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed and everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. Beware, therefore, lest what is said in the Prophets should come about."* And at this point Paul quotes from **Habakkuk 1:5**: *"Look, you scoffers, be astounded and perish; for I am doing a work in your days, a work that you will not believe, even if one tells it to you."*

The message in Habakkuk was the Lord saying, "You want justice? I will give you justice. A justice that is coming upon you, for your sins." And Paul takes this word of immediate judgment from the Chaldeans, and he interprets it as an eschatological judgment that will fall upon God's people in his day unless they repent. He's telling them in **Acts 13**: "Don't be like those in Habakkuk's day, *scoffers*. Heed the warning of the Lord."

Surely one of the take-aways from **Habakkuk 1:1-11** must be just that for us today. That you and I would search our hearts and ask, “God, show me my sin. What am I missing?” And if there is not a sting of conscience there, you don’t have to pretend to have sins that you’re not seeing, or feeling, or may not be there. But pray, “Lord, give me humility. Let me see, and let me repent.” **Pause for reflection and prayer.**

We cannot stop there because Paul says that *“through this man [Jesus], forgiveness of sins is proclaimed!”* Later, after the crowd begged Paul and Barnabas to come to speak to them again, we read that Paul talked with them and *“urged them to continue in the grace of God” (Acts 13:43).* There is grace for sinners; there’s grace for the sin you find in your own heart. We can be different people, we can be changed, and God can be pleased with us. We don’t have to live with a pervasive sense of guilt and shame. So, no matter what sort of injustice you’re feeling, would you pray to the Lord that He would give you a humble heart, and that He would give you eyes to see? We’re all prone to first feel our *own* injustices and see *other people’s* sins first. Maybe ask the Lord to reverse that: ‘Lord, would You help me feel and sense someone else’s injustice before my own, and help me see my sin before theirs? And to know Your grace and mercy in both.’

**Close in Prayer**