

# Route Sixty-Six

*Part Thirty-Five*

*Habakkuk*

*The Just Shall Live by Faith*  
*(John 5:39; Habakkuk 3:17-19)*

*With Study Questions*

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**Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls – <sup>18</sup> Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. <sup>19</sup> The Lord God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills (Habakkuk 3:17-19).**

## **Introduction**

In our studies of the Old Testament we have seen that famines, plagues, grotesque immorality and political oppression are the rule rather than the exception in the redemptive record. In this respect our current challenge with this virus and subsequent quarantine appear to fit right in if one is interested in a biblical application of how one addresses and endures conflict.

I have no expertise as politician, foreign policy, medicine or disease control, so I will not weigh in when it comes to those categories. As a pastor, however, I am quite concerned with the theological implications of how Christians view an event like this. More than one person has lamented to me that one of the most depressing aspects of events like this is how he hears clergy explain them.

Some say, "God didn't want this to happen, but He will turn it into something good," others have gone so far as to say, "God simply couldn't stop it from happening." How can humanity make sense of this calamity? How are people, who believe in the God of the Bible, to view things like pandemics, oppression, famine or any tragedy-whether corporate or individual? It is during times like this that prayers are being offered beyond the norm, yet God appears very silent. This brings us to the opening verses of Habakkuk.

Habakkuk is a very unique Old Testament book in that it is not a record of Habakkuk addressing his countrymen or even foreigners. It is a dialogue between him and God alone. As a prophet he is not so much delivering a message but solving a problem. Initially, it's the problem of God's inactivity. That is followed by the problem of the method of God's activity. And this is all followed by a prayer and a heralding of his joy in the God of his salvation.

We are examining Habakkuk to help us make sense of How God works in history. That is Habakkuk's quest. But above, and in concert with that, it is my prayer that we would join with what has been called Habakkuk's "Hymn of Faith."

**Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls – <sup>18</sup> Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. <sup>19</sup> The Lord God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills (Habakkuk 3:17-19).**

This is not merely an academic or theological pursuit. What Habakkuk discovers is how, even if the normal and even necessary comforts and enjoyments of life are removed from the equation, he will rejoice. His strength is not in what he owns or even in his own might. The Lord God is his strength. His feet are made like deer's feet, firm though in high hills (Psalm 18:33). It's this image of a mountain animal walking on high and shaky ground with extreme balance and confidence. This is where Habakkuk arrives. Let's see if we can get there.

## **Survey of Habakkuk**

The first problem Habakkuk has is one that I think resonates with most of us—God's apparent inactivity. The nation is evil and getting worse and God doesn't seem to be doing anything. He almost sounds whiney, "**O Lord, how long shall I cry, and you will not hear**" (Habakkuk 1:2)? This is not unique to Habakkuk. We see this same sentiment continually in the Psalms (Psalm 13:1, 2; 74:9, 10; 94:3).

Supernatural divine intervention and special revelation was rare even when the canon was open (before the Bible was complete). There were only a couple of generations and specific locations where we find God's verbal interaction accompanied by supernatural events. The great benefit of this is the singular nature of special revelation. If God had a thousand different messages from a thousand different sources the confusion would be overwhelming. There is unity found in the word of God coming from a very singular source. Add to this that these generations, (mainly during Moses and Jesus) were among the most stiff-necked of all time. If you desire to grow in your faith, don't be looking for signs. God's Spirit sanctifies us through His word and in His providential undertakings in our lives. It is generally a long process accompanied by effort and discomfort.

Habakkuk continues:

**For the wicked surround the righteous; Therefore perverse judgment proceeds (Habakkuk 1:2-4).**

The cry of Habakkuk is similar to the cry in the pulpits of America. How long will God allow the evil in our land to continue? The law seems powerless to do anything about it and the wicked seem to be winning. When will God ever do anything about it?

God will reply to Habakkuk with the words:

**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 (Habakkuk 1:5).**

The force of the words seems to indicate that the answer will be both astonishing and perplexing-so much so that I have found that many Bible-believing Christians have a difficult struggle with where this book goes. But keep in mind that the prayer and hymn of chapter three is dependent upon chapters one and two.

The shocking answer for Habakkuk (Habakkuk 1:6-11) is that God is raising up the Chaldeans (Babylon) to execute His judgments on apostate Israel! God describes the Chaldeans in the most vicious terms possible. It sounds as if God is impressed with the ferocious nature of the Chaldeans. But as John Calvin states,

**It was not indeed a subject of praise to the Chaldeans, that they were bitter and impetuous: but the Lord could turn these vices to a good purpose, inasmuch as he elicits light from darkness. When, therefore, we read that the Chaldeans were bitter, and also hasty, God thus intimates that he can employ the vices of men in executing his judgments, and yet contract hence no spot nor blemish; for we cannot possibly pollute him with our filth, as he scatters it far away by the brightness of his justice and equity.<sup>1</sup>**

It is certainly no easy doctrine, hence the prophets second (and no doubt our own) question. This question is prefaced by Habakkuk reminding God who He is. Or perhaps he's just questioning his own understanding of who God is.

**Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One (Habakkuk 1:12a)?**

Habakkuk's confusion is understandable. Usually, evil armies are led by evil leaders. He's is marveling at God's choice as a disciplinarian of His people:

**O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction (Habakkuk 1:12).**

Habakkuk reveals his own humanity in rendering the same questions as the modern Christian (Habakkuk 1:13-17). In short, Habakkuk wonders how a righteous God can have anything to do with such evil people as the Chaldeans. 'We may be bad, but they're worse!' It is through this difficulty that God is elevating Habakkuk's understanding of who He is. Remember, this crescendos in prayer and praise!

But before Habakkuk gets there, he learns the hard lesson that it is God who **"make(s) peace and create(s) calamity"** (Isaiah 45:7). It is God who declares **"the end from the beginning"** and **"will do all (His) good pleasure"** (Isaiah 46:10). It is God who...

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XV*, (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 28.

**...does according to His will in the army of heaven And among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand Or say to Him, "What have You done" (Daniel 4:35)?**

Habakkuk had to learn that he must not view, even the terror that the Chaldeans would not doubt bring to his people, as something beyond the scope of God's decrees. When it gets right down to it, God is never really silent or uninvolved. He is the God of every moment and every event. Calvin states,

**Except then we be fully persuaded, that God by his secret providence regulates all these confusions, Satan will a hundred times a day, yea every moment, shake that confidence which ought to repose in God.<sup>2</sup>**

Habakkuk's first prayer concerned God's lack of judgment of his own people. Habakkuk's first prayer concerned itself with zeal for God's glory. Now he questions the means by which God answers his prayer. "Certainly Lord we desire you be glorified and judge evil in our land, but this is a bit much." Nonetheless, in chapter two we read that Habakkuk is committed to listening. He will **"watch to see what He will say to me" (Habakkuk 2:1).**

God will give an answer. Then He makes a distinction in those who will hear it. The proud has a soul that is **"not upright in him"**. That is the first half of Habakkuk 2:4. The second half of 2:4 is a phrase used in the New Testament no less than three times, conveying a most critical message, **"But the just shall live by his faith"**. We will finish with a focus on this phrase in a moment, but now God now turns His words toward the destiny of the Chaldeans (Habakkuk 2:5-20).

Habakkuk wondered how the pure eyes of God could look upon, let alone use, the Chaldeans for His purpose. God answers that the Chaldeans will be judged. The cup of His right hand will be turned against them. All of men's efforts and rebellion against God will be of no avail, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XV*, (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 42

God has now answered both of Habakkuk's questions. God will judge His people by raising up a more evil people to sack them, and then judge the more evil people for what they did. God will draw a straight line with a crooked stick, and then break the stick. At first glance it appears paradoxical – some might even say contradictory. How can God not be held responsible for using the Chaldeans as His puppets? But there is a monumental difference between men and puppets. Puppets don't desire to do evil – men do. A true contradiction cannot be found. There is no violation of the laws of logic, nor can any logical fallacy, whether formal or informal, be found.

Is it incomprehensible how ordains the free choices, even evil choices of sinful men? Perhaps. It is, at least, incomprehensible to me. I would say that the Trinity is as incomprehensible, as is the true humanity and deity of Christ, as is verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture (did God write Romans, or did Paul write Romans?). But it does not violate truth, and any attempt to bring these things down small enough to fit into the mind of the creature generally results in heresy and unsoundness of soul.

How are Christians to view something like a pandemic? Is it the hand of God? Are His fingerprint on this? To say 'no' is to defy the God of Scripture and cast ourselves into a pool of irrational thoughts. But did God do this as a rash, impulsive and vicious dictator? No! I cannot tell you specifically what purposes God has for the tragic events He ordains. But I know the purposes are divine. I trust that from eternity I will see more clearly the purpose for every stitch of His tapestry of history. The human mind ascends just so high. To offer less is to defy the God of Scripture. To offer more would be presumptuous.

Habakkuk is, as it were, introduced to a God who is much bigger than He had previously thought. The very heart of the king **“is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will” (Proverbs 21:1).**

It is the increased knowledge and appreciation of the incomprehensible power and goodness of God that brings an eruption of praise and thanksgiving from the heart of Habakkuk-the confidence to walk in high places with the feet of a deer, undaunted by shaky ground of life's difficulties.

## Christ in Habakkuk

Where is Christ in Habakkuk? The phrase from Habakkuk 2:4, **“the just shall live by his faith”** is central in the New Testament’s call to depart from trusting in self and trusting in Christ alone for peace with God (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). Habakkuk knew a joy that the Chaldeans and even unfaithful Israelites did not.

What does it mean that the just shall live by faith? Simply explained, **“just”** *dikaioyne* as used by Paul speaks of righteousness. Paul uses the same root word in Romans 5:1 **“Therefore, having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** The word shows forth an acquittal, a pardoning or a removal of guilt. **“Faith”** *pisteos* simply means to believe, to trust, to put your confidence in. And **“live”** means to be alive. In the context, we’re talking about being spiritually alive.

Although every Christian is called to, and should, conduct their lives faithfully, it would be a critical error here to understand this rich phrase to mean that we shall gain life if we conduct our lives faithfully. It would turn Paul’s meaning on its head to read this as if Paul is saying that a person is justified and given spiritual life by faithful living. Again, I think we should seek, and a true believer will seek to live faithfully. But we do not achieve peace with God through our own faithfulness.

Calvin labors the point that “faith is not to be taken here for man’s integrity.” True saving faith “sets man before God emptied of all (even) good things, so that he seeks what he needs from (God’s) gratuitous goodness (alone).”

Jesus is found in Habakkuk in these words in that Jesus is the sole fountain of our hope.

## Questions for Study

1. What was Habakkuk's original prayer? How can it relate to the prayers of the church today?
2. How did God respond to Habakkuk's prayer?
3. What was confusing to Habakkuk about how God would judge Israel?
4. What was God's response to Habakkuk's dilemma?
5. Was it illogical for God to use the Chaldeans to judge Israel, and then judge the Chaldeans? Explain.
6. What did Habakkuk discover that granted him such joy?