

# Habakkuk 1

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[ 0 : 01 ] Tonight we're going to look at this opening chapter of Habakkuk. Habakkuk was a prophet or a spokesman for God. Before we turn to his book, what I want to do is back off a wee bit and sort of set up our time by asking, what's the point of prophecy in the first place?

And perhaps more particularly, what's the significance of the prophetic books that have made it into our Bibles? Why are they in here and what do they do?

What do they bring to the table? And you might not know this, but our Bible is full of prophets, right? Men and women who, it was claimed, spoke for God.

And it was very interesting during our time in Ethiopia, one of the things we were most struck by is that the Christianity that is sweeping across the third world is an incredibly unified brand of Christianity that puts an enormous amount of weight on the supernatural, on God's intervening in history, even today, and healing and speaking, even as the forces of evil step in to destroy and deceive.

They believe in both sides of that. And in some ways, it made me feel ashamed. It made me feel ashamed because I profess to believe in a God who created the world, but because I can't see Him, I oftentimes find myself running everywhere but to Him for the answers to my problems.

[ 1 : 36 ] And in Ethiopia, that's just not the case. In the third world, that's just not the case. There is no answer available but God.

And they see that. They see even if it's going to happen by a different mechanism, God is the mechanic. He's the one that we have to run to.

So in some ways, their vivid belief in the supernatural made me feel ashamed. But in other ways, it made me feel ashamed.

Because the supernatural has for the church in the third world, as they've taken up this book and the God who stands behind it, the supernatural has become a commodity.

And this book that often goes misunderstood becomes merely a means to serving the ends of the people in power. And that's scary.

[ 2 : 36 ] That strikes fear into my heart. Because the story this book tells me is of a human race that, without exception, has gone after God's throne.

And the last thing any one of us needs is the supernatural on our side. To bring about our will for this world. Mine or yours.

Because if that happens, the rest of us who are on the other side of it don't end up with a happy ending. If you're in control, left to yourself, that's not a good story for anybody else.

And it wouldn't be a good story for you if I was in control. But this book has become a commodity. Right? Because at that point, if that's what it is, it's just a race to the top.

Who can get there first and keep it the longest? That's what we do with the power of God or the voice of God on our side. That's why history, from Hercules to Hitler, is littered with men and women wrapped up in the occult.

[ 3 : 50 ] Right? Because if we can't get our way on our own, we turn to greater powers. To twist the arms of the gods or even the one true God to secure our place in the world.

Or our own little worlds if we can't do it with the great big world. That's scary. And prophecy is part of that, being the mouthpiece of God, being God's spokesman.

Because you can do a lot as God's mouthpiece. And you might be here tonight and maybe you're a little like me, wary of anything couched in the language of prophecy.

And I was very wary when two of our students handed in their papers and written on the top of their papers was the prophet such and such.

Because at the end of the day, how do you grade a prophet? Right? How do you grade a prophet? I don't know. We'll see. I haven't graded them yet. But that's scary, right?

[ 4 : 48 ] That's scary if we wield a power that we cannot control. Prophecy's a touchy issue because it often deteriorates just into that. A power play.

A ploy for power. So what's the significance of the prophetic books? Without delving into their content, just looking at their place in specifically the Old Testament, what's the purpose of these books?

Where do they point to? Where do they point from? Why are they here in our Bibles? And you know, not a bad place to start is just looking at where they fall in the Bible.

If you were to turn to the table of contents, it's a page that not a lot of us use, but it's really helpful in a lot of ways. What you'd see is that the prophets are the books that introduce us to the New Testament.

They're at the close of what's called the Old Testament so that they prepare the way for the coming of Jesus. They're the books that pose all the questions of what it means for the Creator to go out of His way to save His creatures and how just forgiving them isn't good enough and how just giving them a bunch of instructions on how to live isn't good enough.

[ 5 : 57 ] And they're the books that take God's whole history of working with His people and says, this can't be it. This story can't be finished. We need more.

We need a Savior. And if we're ever going to know what it's like to live like we were created for, God's going to have to come down and do it Himself and fix us because we can't do it ourselves. The Old Testament in our Bibles is divided into four parts, right? You have the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. They introduce the basic plot line of what's gone wrong and how God is preparing to fix it.

You have the historical books that flesh out that story, show the complications and the complexities of it all. The poetic books that put to words the depth of our need and the hope we have in God. And then the prophets, which ultimately point beyond themselves to Jesus. So if we're going to sum up the significance of the prophetic books, one of the ways we could do it just by looking at their place in the Bible is to say that they point from past despair, from a time when things seemed so complicated and so complex that they were beyond fixing toward future hope that God will one day have his way ultimately in the person of Jesus.

[ 7 : 31 ] And they do this, they point from the past to the future in order to cultivate a present faith. A faith in the only one who can make things right again and who will do so in the person of his son, Jesus Christ.

They bridge the gap between the old and the new, between the promises and their fulfillment, between the problem and its answer.

God's mouthpieces are always telling God's story from God's perspective. God's story from God's perspective.

If you had in front of you not our Bibles that we have today, we've sort of rearranged the Bible in light of Jesus. If you had in front of you, though, the Old Testament that Jesus would have read, you would see that they were arranged a little differently and the prophets played an even more significant role because rather than being at the end of their Bible, they were actually at the very core of their Bible.

You had the Pentateuch, the prophets, and then the writing in other words. The prophets were the very core. And some of the books included in the prophets you might be surprised about because they're not books that we typically consider prophetic books today.

[ 8 : 50 ] Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. But these were the books that God said. This is the story. The very heart of the story of my bringing my people into my land and under my king before my presence and then ultimately though lost.

All of it. All of it was lost. And on these prophetic books, these four, which were known as the former prophets, overlaid on top of them were the latter prophets, the books that we know.

The books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and then a book called the Twelve. And these books were like the silent film of the former prophets having God's voice dubbed over them so that he interpreted his own history.

Very interesting, right? Isaiah talking about the coming judgment. If you do not change your ways, you will get kicked out of my land. Jeremiah saying the judgment has come.

Ezekiel talking about God's people away from God's presence and what does it mean to live in exile. God's voice dubbed over his story.

[10:07] And then you have this book, The Twelve. And in this one scroll supposed to tell a single story, you have what we know as the Twelve Minor Prophets, all the odd names in the Old Testament that none of us can ever remember what order they're in.

The Twelve Minor Prophets. And the Twelve Minor Prophets were to sort of sum up the entire thing and give twelve individual vignettes that showed how God relates to his people.

It's very interesting. We never do this, but they actually tell a single story and you can sort of see that if you were to unroll, unravel that scroll of the Twelve.

So Hosea tells of the extent of God's love for his people, but it is a jealous love that tolerates no rivals. Joel looks forward to the day of the Lord, what any Israelite would have looked forward to as a day of restoration, but Joel looks forward and says it's not just a day of restoration, it's a day of judgment, even for Israel, if they do not turn back to their God.

Yet, Joel says, everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Amos tells the story that following God means a lot more than appeasing him with words, but also fighting for justice, just like God fights for justice.

[11:34] Obadiah, that all hope isn't lost even when the nations plot against God's people. Jonah, though, says that God cares even about the nations that plot against his people.

Go to Nineveh, your enemies, and tell them to repent. Micah peers through the pain of history and sees the hope of God's people in the coming of a royal deliverer born in Bethlehem.

Nahum declares that even amidst the pain, God is the sovereign one over history. And then we come to Habakkuk, Habakkuk.

And what I want you to see is that Habakkuk, like every prophet of the past and anyone on the face of the planet that wants to stand in the line of the prophets, is not so much about predicting the future or puppeting God's voice to secure their own power.

But prophets were all about pointing from past despair toward future hope, all to produce a present faith in the one God who has made a way through his Son.

[12:50] Habakkuk gives us God's perspective on God's story. And tonight, we'll just look briefly at the opening of this book and how it picks up Nahum's theme of the God who is sovereign over history.

And it asks the question, if God is sovereign over history, why when I look at the world around me does everything I see tell me otherwise? In a world so full of pain, so full of suffering, caused for the people of God, and caused by the ones who are supposed to be the people of God, how can I believe then in a God who reigns over it all?

And that's a pretty good question. Because I think that's a question that if we're honest with ourselves, a lot of us will ask at some time or another, maybe even tonight.

And listen to what raises this question for Habakkuk. The book opens in verse 1. The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

And chapter 1 is setting up this question. It says, How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you violence, but you do not save?

[14:13] I cry for help. You don't answer. At least not in the way I want you to. I cry violence, and you do not come to my aid. When will you put an end to the pain and the suffering?

When will you right the wrongs and call to account the wickedness of the earth? And especially what Habakkuk is looking at as the wickedness of God's own people.

He's already watched the northern kingdom, the northern part of God's kingdom, fall to the Assyrians. But Judah's been allowed to wander just the same.

How long, O Lord, till you call to account the godly who have become the godless? He continues, Why do you make me look at injustice?

Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me. There is strife and conflict abounds. Therefore, the law is paralyzed.

[15:15] What good is it? You don't enforce it. We don't follow it. And justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous so that justice, when it does go forth, goes forth perverted.

Nahum wants to say that you are the God who is sovereign over history. If that's true, why do I look around me and see so much that tells me otherwise?

Your people suffer. Your people are often the source of suffering. And you're the judge. And you do nothing. The nations rage and laugh.

Your people rage and laugh and are walking away from you. And you do nothing. And the ones who serve you rightly are caught in the middle of the oppression of the foreigners and the oppression of their own lives.

This, this, this is the God of history. This is what it looks like when you're on your throne. This is the God of justice.

[16:27] With this, Habakkuk turns to the response he saw from God. And you've got to understand this is what he saw as God's response.

He starts out with this question of when will God call his people to account. And he's seen what happened to the northern kingdom already and their wrongdoing.

And asks when God will relieve his true followers from the violence. And in verse 5 he puts the response in God's mouth. He knows God's response.

He sees it. So he has God say, 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 sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people.

[17:29] They are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves. Their cavalry gallops headlong.

Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle swooping to devour. And if you know anything about history, this is exactly what the Babylonians were like.

They were feared and fierce and God says, I'm raising them up. They're coming because I've called. They're playing the part I've written for them in the play of history.

Verse 9, they all come intent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand. They mock kings and scoff at rulers.

They laugh at all fortified cities. By building earthen ramps, they capture them. They mount ramps straight to the walls of the cities and then flood them without mercy, right over the walls.

[18:35] They do not fear kings. What chance is there for the commoners among us? Verse 11, then they sweep past like the wind and go on.

Guilty people whose own strength is their God. How long will you look at the wickedness of your people? Not long.

God says, I'm going to use the godless whose own might is their God, who don't regard me to judge my people just like I use the Assyrians.

This is my response. Be perplexed, he says. I expect you to be perplexed. It is perplexed.

He asks, verse 12, Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, my holy one, you are my holy one. Are you not? You will never die, will you?

[19:37] We will never die, will we? Why then are you sending on us those whose strength is God? You, Lord, have appointed them to execute justice.

You, my rock, have ordained them to punish? Your eyes are too pure to look on wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?

Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? I've seen your answer. I am perplexed. How can this be of you?

You are the God of history. You have made people like the fish of the sea, like the sea creatures that have no ruler. You've left us defenseless. The wicked foe, Babylon, pulls all of them up with hooks.

He catches them in his net. He gathers them in his dragnet, and so he rejoices and is glad. And you're to blame? If you're the God of history, the God over the story, and you're using this people, and they're gathering the nations and rejoicing in their violence, are you not to blame?

[20:46] You are my holy God? Therefore, he, Babylon, sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet.

You used him because you're the God of history, but at the end of the day, your instrument of discipline doesn't even acknowledge you. Instead, he's worshipping his own vessels of destruction. They're worshipping the things that make them rich. For by his net, he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food. Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy?

Thus, the Bacchus questions are stated for the court.

And that's the end of chapter one. Let me take a moment to draw this together and sort of point the way forward to their answer.

[ 21 : 53 ] Maybe we'll look at that in a few weeks or so. What can we learn from Habakkuk? First, I think it's important that we see Habakkuk for all he is.

He's a guy who is struggling to make sense of the world. And I think that's where we all need to begin. There's a lot of people who are content to travel through life drinking themselves to sleep, living like animals, one sexual encounter after another and without any desire to make sense of the world they're living in.

And I think that's a terrible place to be. That's probably a greater waste of humanity than those people who are legitimately trying to understand the world and yet coming to vastly different conclusions than I would come to.

So I think what we can learn from Habakkuk is that life's greatest quest is all about the search for answers to life's greatest questions.

What makes this world tick? Why am I here? Where did I come from? Where is it all going? Who is in control?

[ 23 : 17 ] Life's all about the questions we have. Second, the place that Habakkuk starts when he's trying to make sense of the world is not in his own ivory tower or in his armchair.

Have you ever heard of an armchair philosopher? When I did my undergrad in the States in university, my degree was in philosophy.

So your greatest goal in life as a philosophy student is to become an armchair philosopher. Have somebody pay you to think in your library for the rest of your life.

This was not Habakkuk. He was not an armchair philosopher removed from the world, having removed himself from the experience of life to figure life out.

As if we could ever figure life out, right? On our own, if we just went into some room. Life's not only all about questions, we ask, it's all about where we raise our questions from.

[ 24 : 29 ] And for Habakkuk, his questions were raised when he looked at God and who God said he was, right? It starts with revelation. And then he turns to his world and his experience of the world and that's where his questions arise from.

How do I make sense of who God has told me who he is and what I see around me? Life's all about where our questions come from and that's where they should be coming from.

Listening to God and who he says he is and looking at the world around me and saying, how can it be?

Now, a lot of people are awfully content to let the gavel fall on God without giving God the chance to ever tell his own side of the story.

And for us, if we're gonna know the best questions in life, you've gotta hear God and take him at his own word.

[ 25 : 43 ] And then look at your world around you and ask how so. It's all about the questions we ask. It's all about where the questions come from.

Thirdly, it's all about what we do with the questions we have. You know, Habakkuk's a great guy because he doesn't hide from the complexities of the world, of life in this broken planet, trying to make sense of the pain and the suffering, and a God who says he's on the throne still.

He doesn't just go off and complain about God. What he does when the questions arise is he comes to God and complains to his face.

Questions are going to arise in life, and life's all about what you do with the questions. You can content yourselves to play the judge, to let the gavel fall on God.

Or you can go to him, and those are two vastly different paths in life. Let me close by pointing forward to the answer that Habakkuk finds when God finally speaks.

[ 27 : 12 ] Chapter 2 opens up with these words, I 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, right?

Because I am a prophet, and I need an answer not only to hear, but also to give to my questions. And that's an answer that's got to come from God himself.

And then the Lord replied, and this is the first time God speaks for himself. Write down the revelation. Make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it like a billboard, that it doesn't matter how fast you're going, you're going to see this thing.

It's that important. For the revelation awaits an appointed time. It speaks of the end and will not prove false, though it will certainly come and will not delay.

And here it is. See, the enemy is puffed up. Babylon is puffed up. His desires are not upright. But the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.

[ 28 : 24 ] and the word there is simply faith. The righteous will live by faith. The ultimate answer to our questions, even when we can't make sense of the world, and maybe especially when we can't make sense of it, is that you may be perplexed by the ways of God, but if you want to live rightly before him, don't doubt what God has said about himself, and don't give up the questions, but live by faith.

Trusting in the goodness of God, and that he is the God over history, and that he is not done with the story, and that he is the one who he says he is, and nothing you see around you can change that.

And this is how Habakkuk takes his place as a prophet to point from past despair toward future hope to instill in us a present faith in the only one who can ever answer life's most important questions, and has done so, we know this on this side of history, has done so in the person of Jesus.

the righteous will live by faith. And Habakkuk has more to say about that as chapter two unfolds. We spent a week in Ethiopia pointing a group of pastors to Jesus' life that is to be found in living for him in light of eternity rather than for the here and now.

[ 30 : 10 ] And he partnered with us in that work as we were really in a way ourselves standing in the prophetic tradition of pointing people back to Jesus and calling some who have already taken on the title of standing in the prophetic tradition, we were calling them to stand more clearly in that line, to not wield the supernatural for their own purposes, but to take us as the mouthpieces of God exalting his son.

And at the end of that week, on our last day of the course, we taught our class a few songs that we thought would stir them to see Jesus for who he is. And we taught them Psalm 23 and we sang Amazing Grace.

And then we taught them this song that we're going to close to alone. And the words of this song proclaim the centrality of Christ over all of life as the one who through his death purchased us and purchased for us a new for living not under our own reign, but living under his.

That David was saying this morning, it was his cross that was his throne. And we see in his cross most clearly the king that we've always needed, who lays down his life for his sheep.

So we're going to close and as we sing I'd invite you to reflect on our place in this story and how we might better live in light of it and be ourselves God's mouthpieces, always pointing to Jesus, whether it's at work or home or in play, wherever we might be.

[ 32 : 03 ] Would you stand and sing in Christ alone?