

## ***Message: Habakkuk 1/3***

### ***Preface:***

Well, People of God, we're back in the Minor Prophets. If you didn't get a copy of the preaching map, there are some out in the lobby.

Today we're moving forward with Habakkuk.

And let's get something out of the way. Ha-bak-uk. Habba-kuk. I don't care how you pronounce it. There is no shaming here. I say Habakkuk, and, you know...it's just not going to change. I had a weird moment this week where I couldn't remember how to say this word, because I was playing around with saying it differently, and I got mentally tongue-tied, and it was nerdy and trivial and upsetting. So: On my end, we're talking about Habakkuk. If you want to talk about Habba-kuk, go for it as Galahad went for the grail. I don't care.

### ***Introduction:***

What I do care about is that before we leave I give us some sense of where Habakkuk fits in Israel's history; how it connects to what Judah is facing and will face. So much of what we talk about today is locating Habakkuk and understanding how this book works.

We'll try to connect what we see with how we relate to God, too.

Let's pray!

### ***Prayer:***

#### ***The Man, The Mystery:***

What we know about Habakkuk the prophet is nothing. We know nothing about him.

In fact, we know so little about him that God's People made stuff up. In the apocryphal book *Bel & the Dragon*--an ancient book that isn't considered scripture, but was read widely by the early church the same way we might read a famous devotional--Habakkuk is carried by an angel, by his hair, to feed Daniel, and it's an explanation for how Daniel survived without eating for so long. Not true, but impressive.

But we want to know more about this guy, you know? His name has something to do with, oh, clasping, embracing, hugging...maybe? That's not even entirely certain. This is all we get: "The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received."

### ***Locating Habakkuk:***

There's only one concrete reference in the book, which is in today's passage. The translation that was read to us says

***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,[a]  
that ruthless and impetuous people,  
who sweep across the whole earth  
to seize dwellings not their own.***

### ***Locating Habakkuk: Babylonians/Chaldeans/Neo-Babylonians***

Reading “Babylonians” is fine here, but it's not what the Hebrew says. What's written is “Chaldeans,” which is, frankly, a name for the Babylonians empire that's used primarily in the books of Kings and Chronicles, which are the history books in the Bible that record what's happening around the times the Prophets spoke.

Let's get something in our heads for a minute when it

comes to ancient history. There were the Babylonians, which the Assyrians just totally destroyed, and then there were the Chaldeans, which rose up in the wake of the destruction of Babylon.

The Chaldeans actually were led in their revival by the great-grandson of the Assyrian king Sennacherib who threatened Jerusalem with destruction but couldn't pull it off. We read about this in Micah. That king, Sennacherib, was killed by his own son, and his grandson ended up establishing what the Kings and Chronicles called the Chaldeans.

Biblically, after while, Chaldean gets dropped and people just start talking about the Babylonians. Most historians call the Chaldean Empire the "Neo-Babylonian" Empire.

All this to say: There are Babylonians, which the Assyrians had under their thumb, and there are Babylonians, fifty years later, who had Assyria under their thumbs.

These Neo-Babylonians', or Chaldeans', greatest king wasn't the founder of their new Empire, it was Nebuchadnezzar, the second king of the Empire.

And when we talk about Babylon, from here on forward, we're talking about the empire that rose up from Assyria's destruction and took over the world for almost 100 years.

Nebuchadnezzar ruled from 605 to 562; 40 years of uninterrupted empire expansion. It was a time of peace and prosperity if you were Babylonian, and slavery and death if you weren't.

### ***Locating Habakkuk: Nebuchadnezzar II:***

By the time Nebuchadnezzar is ruling, all that's left of Israel is Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital. And when it comes to Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar does two things:

In 597, he sacks Jerusalem. It's terrible. Many people are exiled, the Temple's treasure is stolen, it's a mess. But--surprise--this doesn't cause the Israelites to, you know, quiet down and submit to his rule. They just get louder and less docile. So in 586 Nebuchadnezzar completely wipes out Jerusalem, tears the walls and the Temple down to the ground so that not even the foundations are left, and exiles every person he can snatch back to Babylon. He loots all the people and

every bit of wealth there is.

### ***Locating Habakkuk: Dating***

So because of all this stuff going on in the world and the wonderful records that the Assyrians and Babylonians kept, we can, with pretty great certainty, date Habakkuk. He's single and he's ready to mingle. I'm kidding. We can date the time in which Habakkuk prophesied. Again, we read:

***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,[a]  
that ruthless and impetuous people,  
who sweep across the whole earth  
to seize dwellings not their own.***

If Jerusalem had already been sacked by the Babylonians, there wouldn't be a surprise about anything. So Habakkuk had to have been written before 597. And it was most likely written after 605, which is when Babylon did the stuff verse 6 talks about, taking out Assyria and Egypt *both* in a

rampaging, empire-consuming way no one would have expected. Zephaniah was written about 20 years before this.

### ***Composition: Inside Israel***

This means that Habakkuk was written during evil king Jehoiakim's reign.

We remember good king Josiah, right? He reigned during Zechariah's time, he launched a total renewal of the religious life of Israel, re-established Torah, and God promised to stave off national disaster on his account, although God said his children would experience it. They did.

### ***Inside Israel: Bad King Jehoiakim***

Josiah's first son, Jehoahaz, reigned for only 3 months before Egypt swooped in and set up Josiah's other son, Jehoiakim, as king in 608. Josiah's first son dies in Egypt. Jehoiakim starts taxing the people like crazy so he can pay off Egypt and keep what little power they allow him.

Three years later, in 605, around the time Habakkuk starts prophesying, Babylon wipes out Egypt, and marches back past Jerusalem. Jehoiakim gives

Nebuchadnezzar treasure, some of his own family as slaves, some stuff from the Temple to buy him off. He starts paying tribute to Babylon, now.

Four years after that, in 601, Egypt gets a little stronger so Jehoiakim decides to switch sides again. Egypt-Babylon-Egypt.

And Look: Everyone hated Jehoiakim. The prophets thought he was terrible, the historical books deride him, written rabbinical histories dissed him. In Jeremiah 20, 22, 26 you can read about how terrible he was, killing prophets, being all evil. His dad was the best, he was one of the worst.

### ***Inside Israel: First & Second Exiles***

Nebuchadnezzar didn't like Jehoiakim switching sides, so he marches on the city, murders him, allows his son to rule for three months before he decides to just deal with the problem of Jerusalem by exiling a bunch of people and putting Zedekiah on the throne in 597. Jerusalem's first exile.

That doesn't work out all that great, either, so Nebuchadnezzar comes back and wipes Jerusalem to the ground after killing all Zedekiah's children in front

of him, and taking everyone to Babylon in 586.

### ***Eighty Years Until Haggai:***

Habakkuk is the last Minor Prophet we'll read before these events take place. If Habakkuk speaks from 605 to 597, Haggai, who comes next, doesn't speak until 80 years later. We have Jeremiah, we have Ezekiel, but when it comes to these Minor Prophets, Habakkuk is our last one until long after everything falls apart, and Jerusalem is razed to the ground.

His words have to linger; they're among the last ones given.

### ***Outlines:***

There are a couple of ways to outline Habakkuk. I put them in your bulletins. But I want us to think about the book through its plot. Let me give us a summary of the entire book of Habakkuk. Here it is.

### ***Habakkuk, Summarized:***

Habakkuk asks how God can let the sin of Judah go unpunished. God says, "I'm not. Babylon is going to be my agent of punishment." Habakkuk immediately asks how God can use such a sinful people, and God says, "Don't worry, I'm going to punish them, too." After a

beat, Habakkuk is sort of like, “Okay, then.” And sings a psalm of praise. We could make this into an outline, too:

***1:1-4: Habakkuk: What about Judah’s sin?***

***1:5-11: God: They’ll be punished. I’ll use Babylon.***

***1:12-2:1: Habakkuk: Wait, you’re going to use Babylon? They’re terrible.***

***2:2-19: God: Yeah, Babylon will be punished, too.***

***2:20: Habakkuk: [Crickets Chirping]***

***3:1-19: Habakkuk: Well...Okay, then. Praise God.***

It’s that beat, that pause in 2:20 that I want to focus on for just a moment.

### ***No Problem Complaining:***

Because, Habakkuk has no problem challenging God. He isn’t Isaiah, meekly following on the grounds because he knows he’s so sinful. Habakkuk charges God:

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

***Or cry out to you, "Violence!"***

***but you do not save?***

***3 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.***

***4 Therefore the law is paralyzed,***

***and justice never prevails.***

***The wicked hem in the righteous,***

***so that justice is perverted.***

"How long, Lord" is the cry of every single person who believes in God and has their eyes open. We see it in the psalm, over and over. We see it Revelation, when those Christians who've been martyred wonder when God will "judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood." God says, there, "wait a little longer." And while they wait, God lets them know more will join them until He acts. God lets Habakkuk, in today's passage, know that the "little while" he has to wait isn't long at all, and that he's raising up the Babylonians as an agent of judgment, they'll put an end to the evil, injustice, and violence that Habakkuk hates. God says,

***"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.”***

Habakkuk wants to back up, here.

***Lord, 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.  
Your 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?***

Habakkuk pushes back. God: This doesn't fit into what I know about you? This doesn't fit into what I think about how you act. This doesn't fit with what I've known about how you act? He points out that Nebuchadnezzar is totally idolatrous, and asks if God

is just going to let this guy, these Babylonians, get away with their evil forever? Then Habakkuk is like, “I’m not going away until you answer me.”

***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.***

God responds, with a long passage we’ll talk about next week, and says, this to Babylon:

***You will be filled with shame instead of glory.  
Now it is your turn! Drink and let your  
nakedness be exposed! The cup from the Lord’s  
right hand is coming around to you, and  
disgrace will cover your glory. The violence you  
have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you...***

He says, basically, “I’ll give back to Babylon what they’re dealing out.”

And when God is done talking, Habakkuk says this:

***The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth***

***be silent before him.***

He's got nothing to say.

He berates God: "How long, Lord?" And God says, "Not long at all. Babylon is coming." Habakkuk says, "What? They're worse than the worst of Jerusalem? And they don't trust you at all!" And God says, "I Know. I'll give back to them what they're dishing out, too." And there's nothing for Habakkuk to say to that.

***Silence:***

We don't know how long Habakkuk keeps silent before he breaks into a psalm about God's enormous power. But it's a reasonable silence. Because God's response is flabbergasting.

When we ask God to do things, if we get answers, they may not be the ones we want. The pile of dead people in Revelation didn't want to hear, "I won't act until more are gathered to you." Habakkuk was appalled that God would use an evil people to judge an evil people, even though the adage that "those who live by the sword die by the sword" has always been true.

***Silence: No Real Answer "Because..."***

But notice: God didn't even really answer Habakkuk. He simply responded to Habakkuk's complaint with a promise that Babylon would get theirs, too. God doesn't justify Himself, He doesn't give reasons about why his choices make sense, God doesn't even say, in a monster voice, "I can do what I want, mere Mortal!"

We can each wonder why Habakkuk's silence gives way to praise, rather than anything else: frustration, petulance, anger, sadness. And I've reflected on this so often this week, but I still don't know why, in the face of this, Habakkuk invites the entire earth to be still.

### ***Silence: Recognition?***

Maybe in this moment Habakkuk recognizes something in God that he hasn't before. We could label it all sorts of things: God's majesty, God's power, God's capacity, God's might. Maybe he recognizes something in himself: some smallness, some dependance. But in light of whatever he recognizes, all Habakkuk can do is swallow.

### ***Embracing:***

All we really know about Habakkuk, remember, is that he trusts God. His name means something like "embrace," and he both embraces silence, and

embraces praise, here.

And I think that's critical to see, because the truth is that silence and praise are both part of what a person who trusts God has to have when they are faced with something that makes no sense to them.

God's response to Habakkuk reveals his capacity, his cleverness, his power, but it also feels a little gross to me--the way he uses Babylon, who will reap what they've sowed, to reap Jerusalem first. It feels like he's given up on their repentance, or raised them for slaughter. I'm uncomfortable with it.

***Silence: More than one thing.***

And yet: Silence is part of a trusting response to God. For someone, like me, who wants to tear this moment apart and explain every uncomfortable aspect of it away, sort each bit in the right theological compartment, silence is the sign of my humility, and the recognition that I don't have every tidy answer as to why God does what God does.

For someone who wants to jump right to praise, jump right into the truth that God can, ultimately, do what God wants, because we're created and God is creator,

silence forces that person to stop and consider themselves and God again, a thing they may not do often enough.

Silence before the Lord can be more than one thing, which is why it's hard to know what Habakkuk's means.

But silence gives way to praise, because if we trust God, we recognize that when we don't have the answers we want to the questions we ask, God promises to be who He has always been, and there is safety in saying "I don't understand, but I know you are good." It's the pause of Holy Saturday that gives way to Easter joy, the waiting together of the first disciples until the Spirit came on them in power.

### ***Conclusion:***

Habakkuk has nothing to say when it comes to God's declaration of what will come on Babylon. But he goes on to praise God, because it's not necessary for him to understand everything.

What do you complain to God about lately? Do you expect an answer? And if God has responded, what have you done? Complained more? Ignored Him?

Bartered, or pestered, or ignored Him?

We must have the trust to bring our complaints to God and listen for a response, the trust to be silent if God responds in a way that surprises us. We have to nurture a relationship with God, a history of trust, that allows us to praise Him when our silence needs to give way to speech.

If any of these things are missing--our complaint, our listening, our silence, our praise--let's consider how we might bring them to bear again.

I'd encourage us to go back into Habakkuk this week and think about this moment of silence and how it gives way to praise, consider what we would do, hearing what Habakkuk hears, and knowing God the way Habakkuk knows God.