Reflection on Habakkuk at the 2017 Midwest Area Staff Conference

By Ben West

Hab\_1:1-17

The book of Habakkuk is unique among the prophets, not being specifically addressed to a particular person or nation, but rather being a published account of one man's struggle with God to come to terms with the evil he witnessed around him.

Habakkuk begins with his complaint to God, asking God, "How long, LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" Habakkuk saw the spiritual decline of his nation, and the rampant injustice. God's good law, with which he had blessed Israel, seemed paralyzed because everyone was breaking it, and no one was enforcing it. Habakkuk couldn't fathom why God would tolerate such evil; why didn't God step in and do something about the wicked, who hemmed in the righteous until justice was perverted. It seemed to him like God was not listening, even that God had forgotten and abandoned his people.

In many ways, our nation parallels Judah in Habakkuk's time. We regularly hear horrible news of violence. Strife and conflict abound. Justice is perverted by activist judges and by those who seek to impose socially devastating policies based on misconceptions about human nature and economics. The rich live in luxury while the nation declines morally and drifts into deeper and deeper national debt.

Young people today are passionate about justice, but their passion is often misguided toward redistribution of others' wealth and affirming self-destructive behavior. Because of the relativism they are steeped in, they don't know what true justice is, basing their goals on subjective feelings of fairness rather than God's truth. Habakkuk was passionate about justice as well, but he didn't demonstrate or protest or subvert; he brought his distress to God. When I minister to the younger millenials who populate the campus, I should affirm their passion for justice but shepherd them to bring their plea in prayer before God, the source and standard of all justice.

When I see this nation in decline with humanism and leftism dominating in the culture among the youth—who are our future—it is tempting to despair and push issue from my mind. When violence becomes an everyday occurrance, I easily become resigned and callous toward it. But Habakkuk was deeply concerned for the problems around him, and he brought his concern to God, pleading for God to act, to help, to save, to reestablish justice in the land. I should have such a soft heart for my nation and my generation, to beg God earnestly to intervene.

The LORD answered Habakkuk's plea, "...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..." Sure enough, Habakkuk couldn't believe that God would do such a thing. His view of good and evil at the beginning of the book was too simple. He imagined that God, who is indeed too holy to look upon sin, would punish the wicked and lift up the righteous, such that his society could return to a peaceful, Godfearing state. He thought that righteous kings could reign a long time and wicked kings only a short time, but Manasseh had reigned 55 years, filling the land with idolatry and impurity, whereas Josiah, the zealous reformer, was cut off before the age of 40. To Habakkuk, God should use righteous nations to judge unrighteous nations, as God had during Israel's conquest of Canaan. But it was inconceivable that God would use a ruthlessly wicked nation such as the Babylonians to judge the comparatively righteous nation of Judah.

Why would God allow, and even send, a wicked nation to take his people captive? Long ago, God had promised that if his people broke his covenant with them, he would send against them a fierce-looking nation to besiege and enslave them (Deu\_28:48-52). The Babylonians were a sign that the Lord was faithful to his promise. God's threats must not be taken lightly, for he is holy and just. But his promises and his words can also be depended upon absolutely, for none of his words will ever fail. God reveals his sovereign might by using nations as his instruments, even nations who do not know him. God revealed his sovereign power by having Caesar Augustus proclaim a census of the whole world to fulfill the prophecy concerning the birthplace of his Messiah. God has promised that he is working in all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose (Rom\_8:28). God has a good purpose that he is working out—his plan for world salvation. Everything he does is for that purpose, and for the glory of his holy name. The Babylonian captivity refined God's people, driving from their hearts the idolatry that had been a stumbling block for them since their slavery in Egypt. God moves nations for the sake of his people—that is how much he loves us and how vast his resources are with which to accomplish his good will.

I can trust that in all circumstances God is working for my good—that he has a good reason for allowing even seemingly tragic things to happen or letting the wicked triumph. Last semester, one student who had studied for over a year stopped studying because he read an anti-UBF article, and another student stopped contacting completely without explanation, but possibly for the same reason. I wondered why God allowed these things to happen? Doesn't God care about these students? Why doesn't he protect them from Satan's attacks? Why doesn't he do something? However, I can trust in God's love and goodness even during discouraging situations.

Habakkuk complained to God a second time, asking how God could tolerate the treacherous Babylonians, who worshiped their own military prowess as they mercilessly destroyed nations. Then he waited for God's reply. Once more, God answered him, this time telling him to write the revelation down so that it could be rapidly promulgated by means of a currier. What God reveals to me, I should write down so that I can teach others. God's revelation is not for me alone; he speaks to people so that others may also benefit as well.

God assured Habakkuk that the revelation speaking of the end of the nation would surely come at the appointed time and not delay. God had told Habakkuk previously that he would do it "in your days". Sure enough, God brought it to pass, and the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and sent its residents into captivity in Habakkuk's day.

God began describing the puffed up, wicked Babylonians, interposing a weighty phrase in contrast to the arrogant: "but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness" or "by his faith". To Habakkuk, this was God's assurance that if Habakkuk remained faithful to him until the end, even in the midst of an unfaithful generation, he would not perish in the destruction of the wicked, but live. Though we don't know what became of Habakkuk, his contemporary and peer, Jeremiah, was spared during the destruction of Jerusalem. Though Jeremiah's own people treated him like garbage, throwing him into a muddy well, the wicked king Nebuchadnezzar commanded his field commander concerning Jeremiah to give him whatever he wanted and let him go wherever he pleased. Truly the heart of the king is a watercourse in the hand of the Lord, directed according to God's pleasure.

The New Testament authors picked up on this seemingly incongruous phrase, applying it in three different ways.

First, in regard to the gospel. Those who believe in Jesus are forgiven because of their faith in him; we are saved only by believing in Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, which God accepted as full payment for the sins of anyone who trusts in the Lord Jesus for salvation. Because of my belief in Jesus, God considers me as righteous; when he looks at me, he doesn't see my sin, but the righteousness of Christ imputed to me. This righteousness is by faith not just when I first believe, but from first to last. This is related to the second application of the verse in regard to the law. The law means trusting in my own efforts to be righteous. This is easy to do and appeals to the flesh. But no one can be justified by the works of the law; justification comes only through faith, and even that faith is God's unmerited gift. Salvation and righteousness are God's grace from first to last; I have no grounds on which to boast, but only to stand in awe of God's grace, that he would choose to save such a sinner.

The final application of this phrase by the author of Hebrews emphasizes not becoming saved, but living by faith. He emphasizes not only faith, but also faithfulness—perseverance until the coming of Christ. "In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay." Here, faith and faithfulness are not separate concepts, but two sides of one coin, faithfulness to God being the expression of faith in God's promises.

So what does it mean to me to live by my faithfulness or by my faith? Like Habakkuk, I must remain devoted to God in an age where others have turned away. I must carry out the charge God has given me until the end and be a faithful witness to the Lord Jesus Christ, proclaiming his gospel and his return. The coming judgment we look forward to the last days is the destruction not just of Jerusalem, but of the elements themselves. Yet God is able to preserve his chosen ones; he knows how to save a remnant while punishing the wicked.

Moreover, I should depend only on God for my strength, my hope, my joy, my righteousness. The reason I am acceptable to God, the reason I can pray, the reason I can think of the last day with anticipation rather than dread, is the blood of Jesus, in which I put my hope. Why am I righteous? Because Jesus purchased my righteousness with his blood on the cross.

Furthermore, living by faith means trusting God in all circumstances, as Habakkuk did. When I look at a situation, I should not see the situation itself, but God, who is at work. Even when I cannot understand why God is doing something, I can be sure that he has a good reason for whatever he allows, even whatever calamity he sends. When I trust his goodness and sovereignty and wisdom, I can remain faithful to him at all times.

Finally, it means living according to the day of the Lord. If I believe God's promises of future rewards in his kingdom, if I believe God's faithfulness and love to remunerate his faithful servants, if I believe that this world and its works and things will be consumed, then I will have power to walk faithfully and testify faithfully, continuing my mission until he comes or I go.

God described Babylon, who were proud and boastful, greedy and never satisfied. But as they piled up stolen goods for themselves, they were piling up judgment against themselves. Because they had plundered other nations, they would be plundered, and what they worked so hard to build for themselves would be burnt to nothing. God would make Babylon drink the cup of his wrath until they were completely humiliated before the nations. Ironically, the king of Babylon was drinking from God's cups from his temple just before he drank from the cup.

The earth would be filled with the glory of God as the waters covered the sea. All the nations would see evidence of God's mighty work and his splendid, praiseworthy deeds when he brought low the ruthless oppressor and brought back his people to the land of their inheritance. The knowledge of God's glory would flow forth like water. Someone mentioned that water flows to the lowest points. The knowledge of God is like this as well; for example, the proud Pharisees witnessed Jesus' glorious miracle and failed to see God's glory revealed thereby, whereas those who humbled themselves to be baptized by Jesus recognized God's glory in him and acknowledged that God's way was right. The proud Babylonians missed what was happening through and around them, thinking that their own strength was the source of their victory rather than God's sovereign will. But when Habakkuk humbled himself before God, bringing his anguished concern in prayer, God opened his eyes to see God's glory.

Thus, Habakkuk prayed in response to God's second answer, "I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord." Hearing God's response, he remembered God's mighty deeds from of old and marveled. He sang poetically about God's powerful wonders performed in order to redeem his people, especially around the Exodus. God had descended on Mount Sinai gloriously and fearsomely, with fire, smoke, and quaking of the earth. When God came down to redeem his people, devastating plagues and deadly pestilence accompanied his visit to the land of Egypt. He struck the waters, and they parted to allow his chosen people to cross through on dry ground. He even listened to his servant Joshua and made the sun stop in the sky as the Israelites pursued their enemies. Habakkuk paints a glorious picture of God's zealous deeds to deliver his people and destroy the wicked who sought their lives.

Habakkuk remembered God's mighty deeds and prayed for God to renew them. He knew that the God he served was the same God who brought the Israelites out of Egypt with a mighty hand and outstretched arm. He wanted to see God's powerful redemptive work in his day. He wanted to see revival again as God brought to bear his divine power on behalf of his chosen people.

I should have a sense of God's history, for the God who worked mightily in the past is the God I serve, and his arm has not grown shorter since those days. I should remember God's mighty work in the nation of Israel, in the early church, in the Reformation, in America's past, and through UBF. Many of those times when God worked were much darker than our present day, and if God could work mightily then, he certainly can do it now. I should continue to pray for revival and repentance in this nation, trusting that God can and will do something new and glorious in this generation.

When Habakkuk heard the terrible news that Babylon would destroy Judah, he trembled and felt weak, but he resolved to wait patiently for the day when God would punish the wicked and deliver his people.

Then Habakkuk prayed a beautiful confession of faith, affirming that even though there were no figs, grapes, olives, produce, sheep, or cattle, still he would rejoice in the LORD, and be joyful in God his Savior. Even though all the outward circumstances seemed sorrowful, Habakkuk's joy was no longer based on the situation, but on God, whom he trusted to save him. In these the last days, we have even more reason to rejoice, for we have received God's revelation concerning his Son, Jesus Christ. We have heard the testimony in God's word of what Jesus did on the cross, showing the unfathomable depths of God's love for his people, that God would pay the highest price of the blood of his only Son to ransom us from death. Sin separates us from God, but if our sin could not separate us from the love of Christ, then what possibly could? God's love for me and his valuation of me as worth paying the highest price for and the hope of being with him forever in heaven is cause to rejoice no matter what happens. Furthermore, the knowledge that God is working out his sovereign will for the good of those who love him in every circumstance is cause to rejoice always, for every situation, bad or good, is from the gracious hand of my heavenly Father, who knows better than I do what's best for me and loves me more than I can imagine. Therefore, even when my ministry seems not to be bearing much fruit, and sheep fail to mature and quit studying, even then I can rejoice in God my Savior.

Habakkuk finishes by declaring, "The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of the deer, he enables me to go on the heights." If God is the source of my joy, then he can also be the source of my strength, for the joy of the LORD is strength. If my joy and satisfaction come from God and knowing him and serving him, and not from any outward thing, then I can be unstoppable; no temptation can cause me to fall from the heights of walking with God.

Father God, you are completely good and absolutely worthy of all my praise and trust. All your works are good. Sometimes I cannot see your working, and it seems like the wicked are gaining ground against the righteous. But you are ruling sovereignly enthroned in your holy temple. Please Lord, though we deserve wrath, remember your mercy. Renew your deeds of long ago and send revival to our land. Please help me to see with eyes of faith and look forward to your coming. May I accept everything from your hand with joy and thanksgiving and find my joy and my strength in you, I pray in Jesus' name, amen.

One word: live by faith and rejoice in Jesus my Savior