

## March 8 Lesson 2 (NIV)

### A PRAYER FOR JUSTICE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 73:1–3, 21–28

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Habakkuk 1

#### HABAKKUK 1:1–4, 12–14

<sup>1</sup> The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

<sup>2</sup> How long, LORD, must I call for help,  
but you do not listen?

Or cry out to you, “Violence!”  
but you do not save?

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Therefore the law is paralyzed,  
and justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous,  
so that justice is perverted.

.....  
<sup>12</sup> 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.

<sup>13</sup> 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?

<sup>14</sup> You have made people like the fish in the sea,  
like the sea creatures that have no ruler.

#### KEY VERSE

*Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? —Habakkuk 1:13b*

# JUSTICE AND THE PROPHETS

## Unit 1: God Requires Justice

LESSONS 1–5

### LESSON OUTLINE

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- B. Lesson Context
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  - A. God’s Inaction (vv. 1, 2)
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- II. Deliberations (HABAKKUK 1:12–14)
  - A. Unmatched Sovereignty (vv. 12, 13a)  
*Turning a Blind Eye*
  - B. Unexplained Silence (vv. 13b, 14)  
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#### Conclusion

- A. The Prophetic Job
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

### HOW TO SAY IT

AsaphAy-saff.

AssyriansUh-sear-e-unz.

BabyloniansBab-ih-low-nee-unz.

HabakkukHuh-back-kuk.

NinevehNin-uh-vuh.

### Introduction

#### A. What a (Sometimes) Wonderful World

Years ago the great jazz musician Louis Armstrong popularized a song entitled “What a Wonderful World.” With his trademark raspy voice, Armstrong sang of the beauty of creation. Most would agree with Mr. Armstrong’s sentiments—there is much about this world that makes it wonderful indeed: the people we love and the sights and sounds that add so much to our lives on a daily basis.

At the same time, there is much in this world that causes us great sorrow and pain. Some things are not wonderful in the least. As followers of God and readers of his Word, we understand that this heartache is the result of the curse brought about by humanity's sin. That does not ease the hurt we feel. It can even cause us to question God and his purpose for the difficult circumstances that we or those we love endure. Our faith can be shaken to the very core.

## **B. Lesson Context**

Habakkuk is another of the 12 books at the end of our Old Testament, which we call the Minor Prophets (see Lesson Context in lesson 1). Unlike the prophet Amos (see lesson 1), Habakkuk mentions no kings of either Israel or Judah in his book. One benefit of this decision is to make the book more universal. Instead of being very obviously tied to a situation concerning this or that king, the book can be applied more generally to any similar situation.

Habakkuk is a challenging book to date. A key to placing this prophet historically is found in Habakkuk 1:6. There we read of God's promise to raise up Babylon to inflict judgment on the wayward nation of Judah (the southern kingdom). The Babylonians are described as a cruel and vicious people who let nothing stand in their way as they swallow up peoples and territories (Habakkuk 1:6–11, not in today's text). Since the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by Assyria in 722 BC, Habakkuk's complaints and God's responses must concern the southern kingdom of Judah.

The Babylonians had replaced the Assyrians on the center stage of world history by first gaining independence from the Assyrians in 626 BC and then eventually dismantling Assyria's remaining control in a series of battles from 615 to 612 BC. Thus Habakkuk's prophecy should likely be dated within the latter years of the seventh century BC as the Babylonians' growing dominance over the ancient Near East became clear. This puts his ministry in the same time frame as Jeremiah's (see lessons 12 and 13). Both prophets interpreted the Babylonians' rising to power as ordained by God, to be used to judge Judah for its wickedness (compare Jeremiah 22:25).

## **I. Dilemma**

### **(HABAKKUK 1:1–4)**

These verses introduce Habakkuk and his complaint to the Lord. In his rather heated exchange with the Lord, Habakkuk's manner of speaking resembles Job's words when he expressed his own frustration with the Lord. Yet the reasons for these men's questions toward God are grounded in different circumstances. Job's anguish was rooted in the tragedy of his personal suffering (Job 1; 2). Habakkuk's concern, however, is much broader in scope.

### **A. God's Inaction (vv. 1, 2)**

#### **1. The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.**

*Prophecy* translates a Hebrew word that can refer to loads carried by animals (2 Kings 5:17; 8:9; etc.) or people (Numbers 11:11, 17; etc.). The same Hebrew word is used frequently to introduce prophetic messages that are threatening or ominous in nature; the NIV translates it with the more benign "prophecy" or "word" regularly (examples: Isaiah 13:1; Nahum 1:1; Zechariah 9:1; Malachi 1:1). Such messages may be seen as burdensome—weighing heavily on the prophet's mind. He must speak them in order to relieve himself of the burden that he feels.

The Hebrew word behind the translation *received*, also translated “saw,” is frequently used to describe the prophetic experience (Isaiah 1:1; Amos 1:1; etc.). The word can indicate that visions are seen or simply that a message is received from the Lord. It marks the prophet as a man of unique spiritual vision or insight; he sees with vision that is empowered by the direction of the Holy Spirit (compare 2 Peter 1:20, 21).

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

Habakkuk wastes no time in getting to the heart of his concern. This is a prophet who is deeply troubled and believes that the *Lord* has ignored his concerns (compare Jeremiah 14:9). The phrase *how long ... must I call for help* indicates that Habakkuk has voiced these concerns to the Lord repeatedly (compare Psalms 6:3; 13:1, 2). The prophet fears that the only explanation for God’s apparent lack of concern is that he is choosing *not* to *listen* to Habakkuk (compare 22:1, 2).

**2b. Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save?**

Habakkuk rightly assumes that the just and righteous God cares deeply when *violence* goes unchecked (see Genesis 6:11–13; compare Job 19:7). Furthermore, the Lord is known as a God who will *save* his people when they call on him (2 Chronicles 20:9; Psalm 107:13, 19; etc.).

**B. The World’s Iniquity (vv. 3, 4)**

**3a. Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?**

This half verse introduces us to two of six words Habakkuk uses to describe the chaos he sees everywhere he turns (see verse 3b). Chaos stands in opposition to the order that God created in the world (see Genesis 1; 2; John 1:1–5; Acts 17:24–28). For this reason, the existence of chaos, especially in the land God promised to his people, is deeply problematic for Habakkuk (compare Job 9:23).

Habakkuk, like Job before him, asks questions of the Lord that presuppose God’s character (Job 3:11, 12, 20, 23; compare Habakkuk 1:13, below). Habakkuk’s questions are not primarily about why he sees *injustice* and his reasons to be grieved, though it may seem that is his focus. The answer to that question is quite simple: people are sinful, and so Habakkuk sees sin around him. The subtext of this question, rather, is why the Lord has not put an end to these things.

Thus the questions are based in the assumption that God is holy and good. Given this fact, it makes no sense to Habakkuk that God is not acting to right the horrible wrongs that the prophet witnesses.

**3b. Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.**

*Destruction* might be associated specifically in the original context with warfare and the taking of plunder from others (example: Isaiah 16:4). When paired with *violence*, it emphasizes the horrible results often associated with war (examples: Jeremiah 6:7; 20:8; Ezekiel 45:9; Habakkuk 2:17).

*Strife* and *conflict* add explicitly chaotic overtones to Habakkuk’s description (compare Jeremiah 15:10). Taken together, Habakkuk longs for the order that the Creator has graced the world with.

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

In an environment such as Habakkuk describes, there is clearly no respect whatsoever for authority or *law* (compare Isaiah 1:23; 29:21; Ezekiel 9:9). The Hebrew word translated *paralyzed*

elsewhere refers to being made feeble (Psalm 38:8), and that is the sense here. The law is inactive and essentially lifeless. By pointing this out, Habakkuk hopes to see God move to action (compare 119:126).

#### **4b. and justice never prevails.**

In parallel to the weakened law, *justice* is also powerless. The situation is similar to the time of Amos, who expressed God's desire that justice and righteousness flow like a never-failing stream (Amos 5:24; see lesson 1). Those qualities are as absent in Habakkuk's surroundings as they were in Amos's.

#### **4c. The wicked hem in the righteous,**

It is not hard to imagine that in the conditions described, *the wicked* appear to be in complete control. They *hem in the righteous*—surrounding them to suppress any effort the righteous put forth to express their concerns (compare Psalms 17:9; 22:16). Again, the situation is reminiscent of how Amos described his environment: “The prudent keep quiet in such times, for the times are evil” (Amos 5:13). David also pondered the prevalence of wickedness (Psalm 11:1–3; compare Job 21:7–13). The reader might be reminded of the sad moral climate that prevailed during the time of the judges in Israel, when everyone did whatever they thought best (Judges 17:6; 21:25).

#### **4d. so that justice is perverted.**

*Perverted* justice becomes the norm under such conditions. This is a violation of what God intends for his covenant people to maintain in their courts (Deuteronomy 16:18–20; compare Isaiah 5:20).

## **II. Deliberations**

### **(HABAKKUK 1:12–14)**

In Habakkuk 1:5–11 (not in our printed text), the Lord responds to Habakkuk's concerns. God intends to do things that Habakkuk could not believe even if the Lord revealed his plans to the prophet (1:5). The Lord tells the troubled prophet that he will raise up the violent Babylonians to administer the Lord's disciplinary measures to his wayward people (1:6, 9; see commentary on 1:12b). Thus God will respond to the violence in Judah by bringing the violence of the Babylonians against it.

#### **A. Unmatched Sovereignty (vv. 12, 13a)**

##### **12a. LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, you will never die.**

Habakkuk speaks again, reacting to the Lord's planned discipline of his people. The prophet ponders what he knows to be true of the Lord. The phrase *my Holy One* is unique in the Old Testament, occurring only here. Similar phrases emphasize God's relationship with all Israel, not with one individual (Isaiah 31:1; 37:23). Habakkuk appears to be alone in referring to the *Lord* as his personal holy *God*. This confidence in his relationship with God probably explains Habakkuk's frank speech.

Ancient scribal tradition holds that Ezra changed this verse to read *you will never die*. Originally, it is argued, the text read, “we shall not die.” If the latter reading is taken as original, then there is more at stake than simply acknowledging that God lives forever. God's eternal nature seems to be the basis of Habakkuk's assertion that God's people *will never die*. Because God is *everlasting* and has made everlasting promises, the prophet feels confident that God cannot really

intend to destroy his people utterly (compare Psalm 118:17). Yet the situation around Habakkuk suggests that his confidence might be misplaced (contrast Isaiah 10:5–7).

**12b. You, LORD, have appointed them to execute judgment; you, my Rock, have ordained them to punish.**

Habakkuk acknowledges the decision of the *Lord* in order to set up the prophet's question in Habakkuk 1:13b, below. *Them* refers to Babylon. The facts as Habakkuk sees them are that the people are marked for *judgment* and punishment, even though they would be the instrument to bring correction to Judah.

Calling the Lord *my Rock* conveys the security of resting in his changeless character (Genesis 49:24; Deuteronomy 32:4; 1 Samuel 2:2). God's history of interactions with his people has proven that he really is faithful and consistent. His decision to correct them seems to contradict his character to some degree.

One should note that Habakkuk has no reservations whatsoever about God's people deserving to be punished for their many transgressions. The way they have trashed the Lord's covenant with them and trampled on his law in the manner already described is unacceptable and cannot be tolerated (Habakkuk 1:2–4). But using the wicked Babylonians to carry out the punishment certainly does not seem a fair or just punishment to Habakkuk.

**13a. Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrongdoing.**

Habakkuk's words reflect once again his understanding of the holy, righteous character of God. God's purity in regard to sin does not even allow him *to look on evil*, meaning not that God does not see but that he does not see without action (see Psalm 18:26; Lamentations 3:34–36). How can the Lord who cannot tolerate the presence of any kind of *wrongdoing* allow the obviously despicable Babylonians to overpower the people of Judah (contrast Psalm 25:1–3)?

## **B. Unexplained Silence (vv. 13b, 14)**

**13b. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?**

Habakkuk is incredulous as he considers the people whom God has chosen to chastise Judah. The Babylonians are described with exceptionally derogatory language by the Lord himself (see Habakkuk 1:6–11). How can they be the ones whom God will use as the rod of discipline? To Habakkuk, to do so seems to compromise qualities that the Lord is known for.

True, the people of Judah deserve the Lord's judgment, but so do the Babylonians. Habakkuk, knowing his own people's evil as he does, contends that Judah is *more righteous than* the Babylonians. At least those in Judah are part of God's covenant people; the Babylonians are wicked idolaters. Habakkuk has not hesitated to voice his dismay over the Lord's inaction toward Judah's wickedness and his proposed course of action using Babylon to deal with that wickedness. Yet the Lord seems to remain *silent* and unmoved by what the prophet sees as obvious injustice (compare Job 21:7–13).

Habakkuk and Jonah are an interesting prophetic pair: Habakkuk questioned God for using a pagan nation to punish his people, while Jonah questioned God for forgiving a pagan nation on the verge of facing his judgment. Jonah's objections were the product of seeing the Assyrian people in Nineveh accept his message, repent of their sins, and thus escape the Lord's wrath. He resented the Lord's compassion toward the Assyrians, insisting that God ought to punish them instead of showing them mercy (Jonah 4:1, 2).

#### **14. You have made people like the fish in the sea, like the sea creatures that have no ruler.**

When God created the first man and woman, he gave them dominion over all other created beings, including *the fish* and all *sea creatures* (Genesis 1:26). Habakkuk, in his bewilderment over God's dealings with his people, wonders whether the Lord is treating human beings as no more than fish and other creatures that are allowed to be captured and killed at random. Apparently there is *no ruler* to hold the Babylonians accountable, or at least it appears that way to Habakkuk.

In the remaining verses of chapter 1 (not in this lesson), Habakkuk continues his marine metaphor by comparing the wicked Babylonians to a fisherman who gathers fish in nets and takes great pleasure in doing so. The Babylonians are portrayed as worshipping their net; that is, they are congratulating themselves and their ability to overpower whomever they please. They are as suited to violence as the fisherman is to fishing.

## **Conclusion**

### **A. The Prophetic Job**

Habakkuk's nation, Judah, was in a spiritual free fall, ripe for the judgment of almighty God. God's method for providing that judgment was not at all wonderful in Habakkuk's eyes. The prophet did not view it as an acceptable solution to the problem. Habakkuk struggled to reconcile his understanding of God with the uncertain world around him.

Habakkuk's concern has been voiced repeatedly through the years. For example, Asaph, the author of Psalm 73, was deeply troubled over what he saw as God's unfair treatment of the wicked. They appear to prosper and live carefree lives while completely oblivious to God and his ways. Psalm 10 begins by expressing similar disappointment in God's seemingly uncaring attitude about injustices in the world. The wicked do just as they please and benefit from their evil while their victims suffer. Doesn't God see? And if he does, doesn't he *care*?

This is a struggle with which nearly all of us can readily identify. When we find ourselves questioning God or his purpose for the circumstances we are confronting, we are in good company. Prophets like Habakkuk and righteous people like Job were some of the most outspoken in their questions and accusations directed toward the one who called them to his service (compare Numbers 11:10–15; 1 Kings 19:4; Psalm 13:1–4; Jeremiah 20:7, 8; Matthew 11:1–3).

God is not caught off guard with such language. Indeed, sometimes he even chooses to engage our questions, though the answers may not be what we hope to hear. With Habakkuk, our knowledge of the Lord can lead us to conclusions that seem correct but in the end require correction from God (compare Job 38:1–40:2).

In all of life's circumstances, but especially in times of discipline, let us rest in the knowledge that God does not change (James 1:17). He is working in our world to accomplish his purposes for us and through us.

### **B. Prayer**

Father, our times often resemble those of the prophet Habakkuk. Many solutions are offered to address such problems, but most ignore your wisdom and fail to see situations through your

eyes. Empower your church by your Holy Spirit to speak forth with courage and clarity the love of Christ and the power of the gospel. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**C. Thought to Remember**

Even when God seems far away,  
he is always working in our circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

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