

February 25 Lesson 13 (NIV)

## Faith in God's Purpose

Devotional Reading: Jeremiah 29:8–14  
Background Scripture: Habakkuk 1:5–2:5

Habakkuk 2:1–5

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Then the LORD replied:  
“Write down the revelation  
and make it plain on tablets  
so that a herald may run with it.

<sup>3</sup> For the revelation awaits an appointed time;  
it speaks of the end  
and will not prove false.  
Though it lingers, wait for it;  
it will certainly come  
and will not delay.

<sup>4</sup> “See, the enemy is puffed up;  
his desires are not upright—  
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness—

<sup>5</sup> indeed, wine betrays him;  
he is arrogant and never at rest.  
Because he is as greedy as the grave  
and like death is never satisfied,  
he gathers to himself all the nations  
and takes captive all the peoples.

### Key Text

*For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it lingers, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.—Habakkuk 2:3*

## Faith That Pleases God

### Unit 3: The Righteous Live by Faith

Lessons 10–13

#### Lesson Outline

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- B. Lesson Context: The Man and His Times
- C. Lesson Context: The Book

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*Make It Plain*

*Breakup*

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#### How to Say It

AssyriaUh-sear-ee-uh.

AssyriansUh-sear-e-unz.

CarchemishKar-key-mish.

EcclesiastesIk-leez-ee-as-teez.

GalatiansGuh-lay-shunz.

HabakkukHuh-back-kuk.

#### Introduction

- A. “Can You Hear Me Now?”

No one likes spotty cell phone service. When a phone call seems to drop out, you ask, “Can you hear me now?” hoping that the other party will respond. In the early 2000s, a wireless network provider used that question as the foundation for a series of ubiquitous television commercials. The advertisements were intended to conjure a sense of trust from the audience toward this particular wireless network provider. The commercial implied there was no need to ask *that* question with *this* wireless provider.

Faced with the unjust behavior of Judah’s enemies, the prophet Habakkuk questioned the Lord. Habakkuk wondered whether the Lord heard his questions or if the Lord had left the conversation altogether. The prophet asked his own version of the question, “Can you hear me now?” The Lord responded, but would his answer be the message Habakkuk wanted to hear?

### **B. Lesson Context: The Man and His Times**

The book of Habakkuk gives us virtually no personal information regarding “Habakkuk the prophet” (Habakkuk 1:1). His name occurs only one other time after the first chapter (see 3:1). Even then, the text provides no further information about the man. Compared to other Old Testament prophets (examples: Isaiah 1:1; Jeremiah 1:1–3), we know nothing regarding the exact details of the life of Habakkuk.

However, some clues in the text of Habakkuk inform our educated guesses regarding the man and his times. Early in the book, the Lord promised to raise “the Babylonians” (also called Chaldeans) to punish the kingdom of Judah (Habakkuk 1:6). Using the then-future Babylonian exile of 586 BC as a historical marker, Habakkuk likely served sometime during the last decade of the seventh century BC; that would have been during the reign of evil King Jehoiakim (609–598 BC).

Following the split of Israel into two kingdoms in about 931 BC (1 Kings 11:43–12:24), things went pretty much downhill for both. The kingdoms of “Israel” (10 tribes to the north) and “Judah” (2 tribes to the south) glared at each other for about 200 years until the Assyrians conquered and exiled the northern tribes in 722 BC (2 Kings 17). The southern kingdom of Judah narrowly escaped the same fate (18:13–19:36), even though they were also guilty of the same behavior that led to the destruction of their northern kin (17:18–20).

About a century later, the Babylonian Empire became the regional superpower after defeating the Assyrians and Egyptians at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC (Jeremiah 46:2). King Josiah of Judah unwisely interfered, contributing to the Babylonian victory; Josiah’s action also cost him his life (2 Chronicles 35:20–27). Just as Habakkuk 1:6 promised, Babylonian forces invaded Judah and overthrew its king (see 36:5–8).

For a few years, Judah’s kings served as vassals to the Babylonians. However, this arrangement didn’t last. During the final year of the reign of King Zedekiah (586 BC), Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians after about a decade of conflict (see 2 Kings 25).

There was a series of deportations from Judah by the Babylonians—one each in 605, 594, and 586 BC. Habakkuk likely served prior to the first of those, given the future tense of Habakkuk 1:6. This places Habakkuk as a contemporary of the prophet Jeremiah. Both prophets received a warning that the people of Jerusalem would face dire consequences because of sinful behavior.

### **C. Lesson Context: The Book**

An outline of the book of Habakkuk reveals a conversation between the prophet and the Lord. Two sections of the book consist of the prophet's questions to the Lord (Habakkuk 1:2–4; 1:12–2:1). Following each round of inquiry, the Lord responded (1:5–11; 2:2–20). In Habakkuk's first section of questioning, he expressed discontent that the Lord had seemingly not heard the prophet's call for correction of sin. In his complaint, the prophet's conclusion for this uncorrected state of affairs was that "the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails" (1:4). The Lord answered that he was going to use the Babylonians to punish Judah and Jerusalem (1:5–11).

This response left Habakkuk even more confused. In his lengthy rejoinder, the prophet asked why the Lord would use a less-righteous nation to punish a more-righteous nation (Habakkuk 1:12–2:1). Today's text picks up at the very end of Habakkuk's second complaint.

## I. One Conversation (Habakkuk 2:1–3)

### A. The Prophet Waits (v. 1)

**1. 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.**

This verse completes Habakkuk's second section of questioning that began at Habakkuk 1:12 (see Lesson Context). In the verse before us, the prophet shifts from questioning the Lord to waiting for the Lord's response. When people call out to the Lord, the timing of his response is always perfect, but it is not always as fast as we desire. Habakkuk himself has been impatient in this regard (Habakkuk 1:2).

Habakkuk had no idea how long it would take—if ever—for the Lord to answer his second question. But he wasn't willing merely to toss his prayer to Heaven and then go about his daily tasks. Instead, we see a determination to stay focused as he waited for a response. In this determined concentration, the prophet envisioned himself as a lookout who would *stand at his watch* as he performed the duty of a person responsible for sounding an early warning of something that was approaching.

In describing the task of a lookout, the phrases *I will stand at my watch* and *station myself on the ramparts* are similar to Isaiah 21:8: "Day after day, my lord, I stand on the watchtower; every night I stay at my post." In Habakkuk's day, lookouts were stationed at vantage points such as high towers. From such vantage points, lookouts were in a position to see things that others could not yet see. Thus, they warned of approaching enemies (example: 2 Kings 9:17–20) or visitors (example: 2 Samuel 18:24–28).

The Old Testament prophets were spiritual lookouts for the people they served. The prophets were to proclaim the arrival of the Lord's reign (example: Isaiah 52:8–10) and warn the people of the consequences of their disobedience (example: Ezekiel 3:16–17). In most cases, the people failed to heed the warning of these prophetic watchmen (example: Jeremiah 6:17). But if their failure to heed was due to the prophet's failure to warn, then the prophet would be accountable (Ezekiel 3:20).

The distressed prophet was obviously concerned for the welfare of his people. A different translation of *this complaint*, "when I am rebuked" (acknowledged in the NIV footnote of this verse), acknowledged that Habakkuk might be rebuked by the Lord.

## B. The Lord Responds (vv. 2–3)

**2. Then the LORD replied: “Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.**

As Habakkuk anticipated, *the Lord replied* to the prophet’s complaints. The content and form of *the revelation* the prophet experienced are uncertain.

When prophets wrote messages from the Lord, they frequently did so on rolls (scrolls) of papyrus (see Isaiah 8:1; Jeremiah 36:2–4, 28). However, the *tablets* commanded of Habakkuk were likely made of stone, similar to the “tablets of stone” on which the law was divinely etched and given to Moses (Exodus 31:18; 32:15–16; Deuteronomy 4:13). The content of this revelation, etched plain and legible in stone, was, therefore, an almost-permanent medium for the message. Ancient scrolls were fragile and could be burned (Jeremiah 36:22–23); the same cannot be said of stone.

The Lord sometimes commanded that his prophets write down his message as a witness for the people (examples: Exodus 34:27; Isaiah 30:8; Jeremiah 36:2–3). At other times, however, the Lord sealed his message until its fulfillment (examples: Daniel 8:26; 12:4). Because the Lord did not seal this particular message, the people of Judah would have immediate knowledge of its content and implications.

In ancient times, *a herald* might *run* to proclaim the content of vital, time-sensitive messages (Joshua 7:22). Without modern-day wireless communication, running messengers were the quickest way to convey information over distance. The speed with which the message needed to travel highlighted its importance.

**3. “For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.**

Habakkuk had waited for the Lord (Habakkuk 1:2; 2:1), and now part of the waiting concluded as the prophet received the Lord’s response. But there was more waiting to come for Habakkuk to see the fulfillment of *the revelation at an appointed time*. God’s promises would eventually be fulfilled, but not on a timetable that Habakkuk desired.

We frequently become impatient when we have to wait. Rather than wait for God to act, we may take steps to expedite God’s promises (examples: Genesis 16:1–4; see also Psalm 106:13). Rather than see God as patient (see Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:8–9), we interpret God’s silence as his refusal to act or hear (compare Lamentations 3:8, 44). Habakkuk needed to trust that the Lord would respond to wickedness in the Lord’s own time and manner (see Nahum 1:3).

## II. Two People

(Habakkuk 2:4–5)

### A. The Proudful, Part 1 (v. 4a)

**4a. “See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright—**

The Lord’s message distinguishes two types of people. The first type is the person who is *puffed up* with self-assured pride and arrogance. Such a perspective was indicative of Judah’s

enemies during this time. The military strength of the Babylonians was undeniable, leading them to count their power as a god (Habakkuk 1:11). Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar saw the expanse of the kingdom as the result of his power (see Daniel 4:28–30). Even as the Lord raised the Babylonians to conquer Judah, he acknowledged their pride (see Habakkuk 1:7). Similarly, when the unnamed king of Assyria looked out over his conquest, he proclaimed the strength of his hand (see Isaiah 10:12–13).

Even the kingdoms of Judah and Israel were guilty of arrogance (see Jeremiah 13:9; Hosea 5:4–5; 7:10; Amos 6:8). This behavior was part of the reason that enemies conquered them. The Lord detests those whose thoughts and behavior are grounded in pride (Proverbs 16:5). Such people will inevitably face dramatic consequences (see Leviticus 26:19; Luke 18:14).

## **B. The Faithful (v. 4b)**

### **4b. “but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness—**

This half-verse offers an immediate contrast between two types of people. One type—the prideful—has just been discussed. The second type—the *righteous*—lives with an entirely different outlook, one of *faithfulness*. Their lives are grounded in righteousness. Such a person follows God’s standards regarding their relationships with God and others. This person lives with integrity and without blame for wrongdoing (see Proverbs 20:7).

Psalms 15, attributed to King David, depicts the mindset and behavior of a righteous person. This type of person speaks well of others (Psalm 15:2–3), keeps a trustworthy word (15:4), and treats others fairly (15:5). God expresses great pleasure when his people live justly and righteously (see Hebrews 11:7). This is because his nature is righteousness (Ezra 9:15; Psalm 116:5), and his rule over creation is one of justice (see Hebrews 1:8).

The Hebrew word translated *faithfulness* is also translated as “truth” in Jeremiah 5:1, 3; 7:28; 9:3. To be a person of faith goes hand in hand with being a person of truth. Unfaithful people depart from the truth (2 Timothy 2:17–18; 3:8–9). In the book of Habakkuk, God calls his people to have faith in the truth of his plans, even when those plans seemed unbelievable (Habakkuk 1:5). Although the Babylonians would prosper for a time by placing faith in themselves, the people of Judah were to depend on the Lord. The apostle Paul connected the concepts of truth and faithfulness in applying them to his ministry as an apostle (1 Timothy 2:7; Titus 1:1). We must proclaim truth and live with faithfulness as we follow God and trust him.

Elsewhere, Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4b in explaining the nature of the gospel with regard to righteousness, which is a characteristic of God that is to be ours as well (Romans 1:16–17). In a preliminary sense, to be righteous is to do what is right in God’s eyes. But having a right standing with God can’t be based on mere good behavior because, as Paul later noted, “There is no one righteous, not even one” (3:10, drawing on Psalms 14:1–3; 53:1–3; and Ecclesiastes 7:20). Instead, a right standing before God is imputed on the basis of faith (Romans 3:21–26). This basis is reaffirmed in Galatians 3:11–14, where Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4b again.

In a section of Hebrews that teaches the importance of the perseverance of faith, the author also quotes from a portion of Habakkuk 2:3: “For, ‘In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay.’ And, ‘But my righteous one will live by faith’ ” (Hebrews 10:37–38a). We live by faith because we can trust that God will also be faithful to his promises.

## C. The Pridedeful, Part 2 (v. 5)

**5a. “indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied,**

In a continuation of Habakkuk 2:4a, above, the Lord’s message returns to the behavior of the *arrogant* person. Becoming drunk on *wine* might follow a successful military campaign (example: 1 Samuel 30:16). Babylon’s military successes were intoxicating, leading the nation to desire more through military conquest. Babylon was incapable of staying at rest in her homelands (compare and contrast the behavior of the “Babylon” depicted in Revelation 14:8; 17:3–6; 18:3).

The Hebrew word translated *grave* is a vague word that occurs dozens of times in the Old Testament. In contexts involving *death*, it is translated as “realm of the dead” about half the time and “grave” about half the time. As such, it may not refer to hell as the New Testament uses that word in Matthew 5:22, 29–30; James 3:6; and elsewhere. The word in the original language has a similar spelling to the Hebrew word for *ask*. This association brings to mind a place that is always asking for more but is never satisfied. Similarly, the desires of the proud and arrogant never cease; they never say, “Now I have enough” (compare Proverbs 30:15–16; Ecclesiastes 5:10; Luke 12:15–21).

The Bible addresses the danger of pride and arrogance more than 200 times. By proportion, the greatest concentrations of these are found in the texts of Psalms and Proverbs. Arrogant, prideful people always incur God’s disfavor (examples: Psalms 18:27; 31:23; Proverbs 15:25; 16:5).

**5b. “he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.”**

One way that the proud expand their power is through military conquest. As a planter gathers fruit at harvest, prideful rulers gather *all the nations* under their authority and conquest (compare Habakkuk 1:15–17). During these campaigns, enemies took captives into exile and slavery (see 2 Kings 15:29; 17:6; Jeremiah 50:33).

However, such prideful behavior will not go unpunished. God will reverse selfish ambition. In response to the arrogant and destructive behavior of Judah’s enemies, the Lord predicts punishment in terms of five sets of “woe” (Habakkuk 2:6–19, not in today’s text). Although Judah was to suffer for its arrogant disobedience, its prideful and arrogant enemies would also experience a downfall equally devastating, if not more so (see Jeremiah 51:6–8).

## Conclusion

### A. Questioning God

Is it OK to question God’s (apparent) actions or inactions? The dependable answer is, “It depends.” We see God tolerating, even welcoming, questions in numerous places (examples: Judges 20:18; James 1:5; 4:2). One thing God does not tolerate, however, are inquiries that question his justice (see Job 40:8; Ezekiel 18:25–29; Jeremiah 2:29). The prophet Habakkuk came close to doing that. Consider the following thumbnail sketch of the book:

Question 1: Why do you, O God, tolerate the sins of your people?

Response 1: Don’t worry about it—I’m sending the Babylonians to punish them.

Question 2: How is it fair to use the less-righteous to punish the more-righteous?

Response 2: Don't worry about it—the Babylonians will get theirs too.  
God's ending of the discussion: Be quiet!

When our suffering does not seem “fair,” there are a lot of questions we might naturally ask. God was under no obligation to answer Habakkuk's questions, and he is not obligated to answer ours. Habakkuk needed faith to trust the Lord's plans, regardless of whether or not those plans made human sense.

God reminded Habakkuk that a life of faithfulness was most important. And the faith we are talking about isn't “blind faith”—a faith where one merely believes. Instead, the faith we are talking about is a faith based on evidence. God has a long track record of faithfulness to his promises. Upon that track record is where our faith is based. Such faith trusts God's control in all circumstances. As a result, we can be secure in him, regardless of whether or not we understand his plans.

### **B. Prayer**

God, as we face life's hardships and want to question you, help us have the confidence of faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

The righteous will live by faith.<sup>1</sup>

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