



Habakkuk

Transcript

Introduction

00:00-00:57

The book of the prophet Habakkuk. He lived during the final decades of Israel's southern kingdom, and it was a time of injustice and idolatry. He saw the rising threat of Babylon on the horizon, and that was not good news for anybody. But unlike the other prophets, Habakkuk does not accuse Israel. He doesn't even speak on God's behalf to the people. Rather, all of his words are addressed personally to God, and the book tells about Habakkuk's personal struggle, his journey of trying to believe that God is good when there is so much evil and tragedy in the world.

And so Habakkuk's words are actually poems of lament, and they're very similar to the laments that you find in the book of Psalms. The poet lodges a complaint and then draws God's attention to suffering or injustice in the world, demanding that God do something. And knowing about this lament form, it's actually the key to understanding the design and message of this short book.

Chapters 1-2

00:58-04:40

Chapters 1 and 2 are framed as a back-and-forth argument between Habakkuk and God, and the prophet lodges two complaints, to which God offers two responses. His first complaint is that life in Israel has become horrible. The Torah is neglected, resulting in violence and injustice, and it's all being tolerated by Israel's corrupt leaders. And Habakkuk, he's crying out asking God to do something, but nothing seems to change.

But then all of a sudden, God responds. He says that he's very aware of the corruption of his own people, Israel, and that he's summoning the armies of

Babylon to bring down his justice on Israel. And very similar to the message of Micah or Isaiah, God says he will use this terrifying empire to devour Israel because of their injustice and evil.

But Habakkuk has a problem with this answer, and so he offers his second complaint. He says, "Babylon is even worse than Israel! They're more corrupt. They're more violent. They have deified their own military power. They treat humans like animals, gathering them up like fish in a net." He says, "They devour nations and people groups in order to build their own empire." And so Habakkuk says, "How can you, a holy, good God, use such corrupt nations as your instruments in history?" He demands an explanation. In fact, he depicts himself as a watchman on the city walls, waiting for God's response, which eventually comes.

God tells Habakkuk to get out some tablets and chisel and write down what he sees and hears. It's a vision about an appointed time in the future, that even though it may seem slow in coming, it will eventually come. In fact, God says that the righteous person will live by their faith in this hope and vision. So what is this divine promise that Habakkuk is supposed to write down? It's that God will bring Babylon down. God says that the violence and oppression of the nations creates this never-ending cycle of revenge and that God will use this cycle to bring about the rise and fall of nations. The fact that God might, for a time, use a corrupt nation like Babylon does not mean that he endorses everything that they do. He holds all nations accountable to his justice, and so Babylon will fall along with any other nation that acts like them.

God's promise is then elaborated by a series of five woes that describe the kinds of oppression and injustice that's perpetrated by nations like Babylon. The first two target unjust economic practices, like how wealthy people will charge ridiculous interest just to keep poor people in debt, and so they build their wealth through crooked means. The third woe is a critique of slave labor, treating humans like animals and threatening them with violence if they don't produce. The fourth woe targets the abuse of alcohol by irresponsible leaders. While people are suffering under their bad leadership, they're partying and wasting their money on sex and booze. And the last woe exposes the idolatry, the engine that drives such nations. They have made money and power and national security into their gods, offering these allegiance at all costs, and so people become slaves to their own national empire.

Now, the practices described here aren't unique to Babylon, but that's part of the point. Given the human condition, most nations eventually become Babylon. And so this is how God's answer to Habakkuk in this book becomes God's answer to all later generations, to anyone who lives in a world ruled by other Babylons.

But it leaves the question hanging: Is God going to let this cycle, the rise and fall of Babylon-like empires, go on forever? And that question is what chapter 3 is about.

Chapter 3

04:41-06:19

We're told that this is a prayer of Habakkuk, and it begins by Habakkuk pleading with God to act now in the present, like he has in the past, in bringing down corrupt nations. And what follows is a very ancient poem. It first describes a powerful, terrifying appearance of God. It's very similar to the opening poems of Micah and Nahum and similar to the appearance of God at Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus. There's cloud and fire and earthquake. When the creator shows up to confront human evil, everybody will be paying attention.

Habakkuk then goes on to describe this future defeat of evil as a future exodus. So just like God came as a warrior and he split the sea in his battle against Pharaoh, Habakkuk says that God will once more bring his judgment down on the head of the evil house. So Pharaoh, like Babylon, has become here an archetype of violent human nations. But at the same time, we're told that when God confronts evil, he will save his people and his anointed one. It's a reference to the king from the line of David.

And so in this poem, the exodus story of the past has become an image of the future exodus God will perform. He will once again defeat evil and bring down the Pharaohs and the Babylons of this world. He'll bring justice to all people and rescue the oppressed and the innocent. And it's this hope that enables Habakkuk to conclude the book with hopeful praise. Even if the world's falling apart with food shortage or drought or war or whatever, he will choose trust and joy in the covenant promises of God.

Conclusion

06:19-06:48

And so Habakkuk, by the end of this book, becomes a shining example of how the righteous live by faith. Habakkuk recognizes just how dark and chaotic the world and our lives can become, and he invites us into a journey of faith, of trusting that God loves this world more than we do and that he will one day deal with its evil. And that's what the book of Habakkuk is all about.