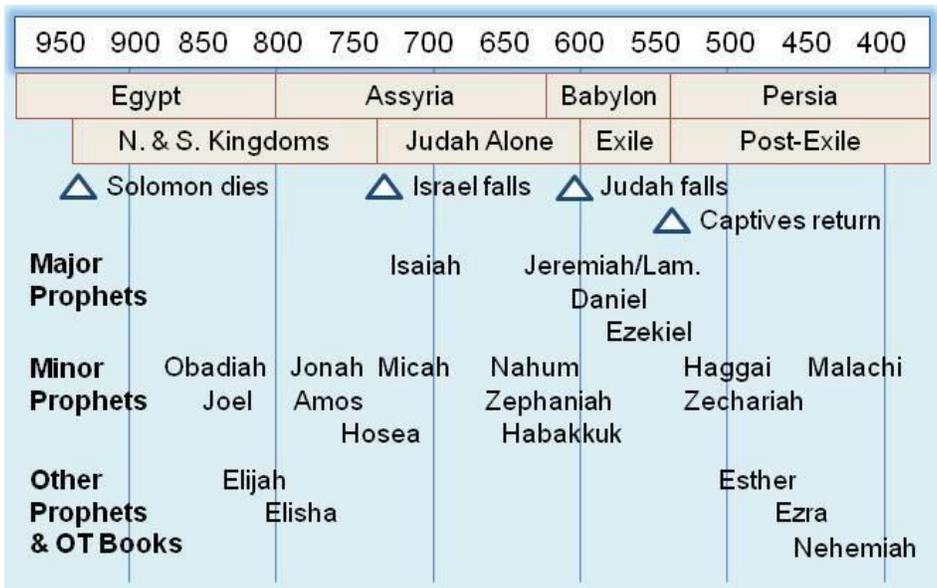


Title Page / Habakkuk’s Heart: The Lord be with you. We are taking a few Sundays to dwell on Habakkuk’s prayer and I have been asked for today to take a broad look at the context of Habakkuk’s story and I’m happy to do that. And then I would like to end by thinking about how this story intersects with our lives and if there is a hook that we can hang our questions of “why” on.



Context: A quick overview of the book of Habakkuk would look like this. Habakkuk is one of the minor prophets in the Old Testament. A contemporary of Zephaniah and Nahum, he was present about 100 years after the fall of the Northern Kingdom and in the time period when the Assyrian Empire was declining on the world stage and the Babylonian Empire was rising.

Authorship / Name

- ❖ The author is identified as Habakkuk in 1:1 and 3:1.
- ❖ Identifies himself as a prophet
- ❖ “For the choir director, on stringed instruments” suggests he had a priestly background.
- ❖ The meaning of his name seems to be connected to the root of a Hebrew word which means “embrace or clasp.” At the end the prophet finally clings to Yahweh as the God of his salvation and strength.

Authorship: The author is identified as Habakkuk, a prophet with a priestly background. But, so little is known of him that it is all speculative at best. The meaning of his name is somewhat ambiguous but seems to be connected with a root of a Hebrew word which means “embrace or clasp.” But how is this to be understood, we don’t know? We should probably understand this in an active sense, “one who embraces or clings to,” rather than the passive, “one who is embraced.” Because, in spite of his

quandary over the coming invasion, the prophet finally clings to Yahweh as the God of his salvation and strength.

Date and Theme:

- ❖ Habakkuk prophesied shortly before Babylon's invasion in 605 B.C.E.
- ❖ The theme of this prophecy flows out of Habakkuk's perplexity over the coming invasion and how it impacts his view of God.
 - 1) Why did God permit the increasing evil in Judah to go unpunished?
 - 2) How could a Holy God use sinful nations like Babylon as God's source of judgment?

Date: Because the book anticipates the coming Babylonian invasion and shows an awareness of the fame of the Babylonians, scholars tend to think that Habakkuk prophesied shortly before Babylon's invasion in 605 B.C.E.

Theme: The theme of this prophecy flows out of Habakkuk's perplexity over the coming invasion of the Babylonians. It concerns the problems of his faith in the face of two apparent difficulties: (1) Why did God permit the increasing evil in Judah to go unpunished (1:2-4)? And how could a Holy God (1:13) use sinful nations like Babylon as God's source of judgment (1:12-2:1)?

Memorable Phrases: There are several phrases that you've probably heard before though you may not have guessed they were from originally from Habakkuk, which is why I simply highlight them here.

- 2:4 - "the righteous will live by their faith" - Paul / God

- 2:14 - "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" - God

- 3:2 - "in wrath remember mercy" - Habakkuk

Outline / Flow of Book

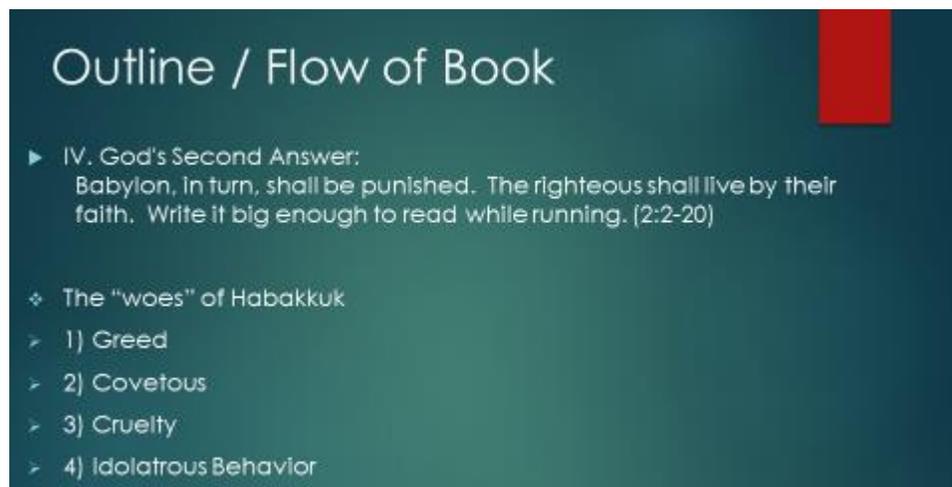
- ▶ I. Habakkuk's first question:
Why does wrong seem to triumph? (1.1-4)
- ▶ II. God's First Answer:
Judean wrongdoers will be punished. (1:5-11)
- ▶ III. Habakkuk's Second Question:
Why does God allow the more wicked to punish the less wicked? (1:12-2:1)

Outline/ Flow of Book: the prophecy attributed to a Habakkuk consists essentially of five sections.

I. Habakkuk's first question: Why does wrong seem to triumph? (1.1-4)// The prophet cries to God because of the lawlessness he sees around him and asks how long it will go unpunished. This is not about war, what's coming. This is about what Habakkuk sees in his city, in his country...with his own people. It angers and grieves him tremendously. He is burdened. "Why does wrong seem to triumph?"

II. God's First Answer: Judean wrongdoers will be punished. (1:5-11) // God announces, I'm going to raise up the Chaldeans / Babylonians and then God goes on to describe the fierceness of their armies and their contempt for all who stand in their way. And Habakkuk is shaking in his boots! It's almost like, you know, be careful for what you ask for! Because here it comes. And God's answer is not exactly what he had in mind for it now raises another question.

III. Habakkuk's Second Question: Why does God allow the more wicked to punish the less wicked? (1:12-2:1) // But if you are a holy God, how can you allow the brutal inhumanity and idolatry of the Chaldeans, whose atrocities are worse than the evils that they are sent to punish? Yes, we might be bad, but we're not as bad as that! The prophet waits in his watchtower to see if God will resolve his dilemma. Don't know how long he waits.



Outline / Flow of Book: IV. In the fourth section is God's Second Answer to Habakkuk: Babylon, in turn, shall be punished. The righteous shall live by their faith. (2:2-20) // God is saying that the answer comes in the affirmation of the principle that the pride of the Chaldean's will be their downfall and death... (Prov. 16:18 / Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall) but that the faithfulness of the righteous will be their salvation. "Write it on tablets big enough so that those running by can read it." (who is running?) It is coming, their fall....you can be sure of it.

And also in this fourth section are the "woes" of Habakkuk. It is really God speaking here and God is hot. God is angry. And these "woes" revolve around 4 different types of behavior between people that are just flat out wrong. 1) Greed; 2) Covetous 3) Cruelty 4) Idolatrous behavior: in other words, humans being inhumane toward one another. It leads to downfall. It leads to ruin.

Outline / Flow of Book

- ▶ IV. God's Second Answer:
Babylon, in turn, shall be punished. The **righteous shall live by their faith**. Write it big enough to read while running. (2:2-20)
- ❖ The "woes" of Habakkuk / **Righteousness**
 - 1) Greed / **Generosity**
 - 2) Covetous / **Self Sacrifice**
 - 3) Cruelty / **Kindness**
 - 4) Idolatrous Behavior / **Life Giving Behavior**

Outline / Flow of Book: Just as a side note, I would simply take a moment to highlight what I think Righteousness / faithfulness means here or looks like (faithfulness to the opposite of the woes). This is what a life of salvation looks like. This is what the righteous shall live by faith looks like: 1) instead of the unrighteous of greed / there is the righteousness of generosity; 2) Self Centered living / self-sacrificing; 3) Cruelty / Kindness 4) Idolatrous and Unjust Behavior / Life giving behavior. The righteous shall live by their faith. "This way leads to life" says God. That way leads to ruin. Just watch. And if that wasn't enough, God makes this final point.

Outline / Flow of Book

- ▶ IV. God's Second Answer continued:
- ❖ "Of what value is an idol that someone has carved? Or an image that teaches lies? For those who make them trust in their own creations; they make idols that cannot speak. Woe to the one who says to wood,
'Come to life!
Or to the lifeless stone,
'Wake up!
Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver;
there is no breath in it."

"The Lord is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent
before him." (2:18-20)

Outline / Flow of Book: (2:18-20) "Of what value is an idol that someone has carved? Or an image that teaches lies? For those who make them trust in their own creations; they make idols that cannot speak. Woe to the one who says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to the lifeless stone, 'Wake up!' Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it. The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him." It is almost as if God just dropped the mic. There is no more to be said. Because even if the earth appears to be in shambles, God still reigns and has the power to restore. And nothing else does.

Outline / Flow of Book

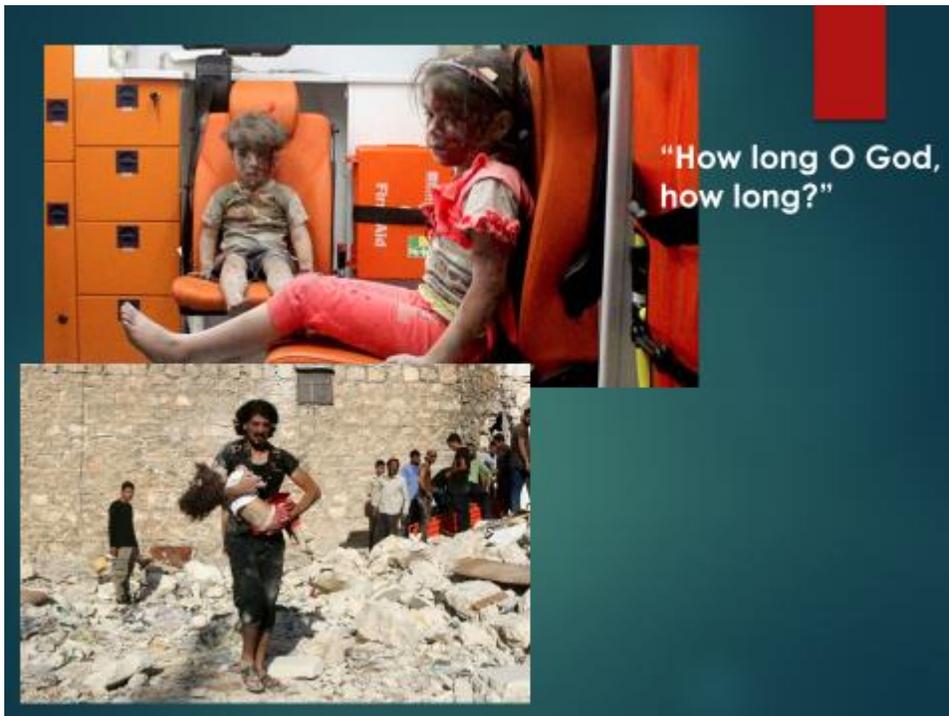
- ▶ V. The Prayer of Habakkuk:
He asks of God, "in wrath to remember mercy".
- ❖ God replies that God is mighty to punish the wicked and to save those who repent.
- ❖ Habakkuk closes with praise, "God, the Lord, is my strength." (3:1-19)

Outline / Flow of Book: And then the 5th section. V. The Prayer of Habakkuk: He asks God, in the midst of wrath, to remember mercy. God replies that God is mighty to punish the wicked and to save those who repent. Habakkuk closes with saying that he will wait for the day of calamity to come upon those who invade and then ends with praise, "God, the Lord, is my strength." (3:1-19). He "embraces / clasps" God. Well, that's a quick overview of the book. But the question is, "How might Habakkuk intersect with our lives today?"

Focus Summary....

- ▶ Habakkuk is one of the most poignant and painful books in the Bible...
- ❖ The heart of the book consists of a prayer dialogue between Habakkuk and God, concerning the (theological) meaning behind the atrocities that have befallen and are coming to his country.
- ❖ This dialogue is not uncommon when hard things take place in our lives.

Focus Summary: Habakkuk is one of the most poignant and painful books in the Bible. It is about a very particular event concerning a very particular point in time. But the reality is, at least in my experience, this conversation didn't stop with Habakkuk. It is timeless. "How long O Lord" is very real for many people.



How Long? You could easily envision someone from Syria or any number of other countries going through who are going through political or economic or military devastations. "How Long O God. How long?"



How Long? You can all too easily envision it every time you watch the news right now. Covid 19 is invading. The implications are going to be long lasting. And so we can identify with the words of Habakkuk when he looked to God for an explanation and an answer. Habakkuk's pain is universal as he tries to understand God in the mist of what is hard to understand. I live there. I suspect many of you have at different times have as well. It is hard. The "why" questions. The "How long O God, how long?" Those are some of the hardest questions that we really can't answer.

God's Answer Then and Now:



Donatello's Habakkuk
(1386-1466)

- ❖ How can we justify the Goodness of God and the Powerfulness of God, with the presence of evil?
- ❖ We form it in our "Why?" and "How Long, O God?" questions.
- ❖ God answers those questions spatially rather than numerically / definitively.

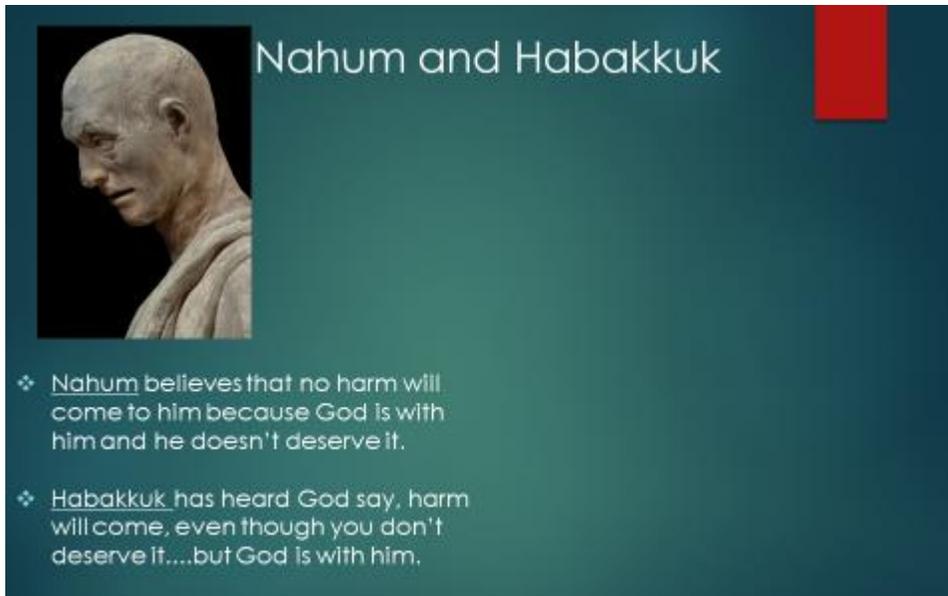
God's Answer Then and Now: And so God answers it for us. Not numerically and definitively as we often ask the question but spatially. God's answer...wait for it... it is a spatial answer. But wait for it in a certain way. Wait for it in faithfulness, active faithfulness. The spatial-ness of Generosity, Self-giving, Kindness, Life Giving Behaviors. It is coming, your answer, but in the meantime, wait like this. And you know, that doesn't always feel like a very satisfying answer, does it? But there is something significant about this answer. By way of illustration, let me put another variable into our time together and that is the prophet Nahum who is looking at the same thing that Habakkuk is looking at...but there is a difference.

Nahum and Habakkuk



- ❖ Nahum is angry at the Assyrians.
Habakkuk is angry at God.
- ❖ Nahum's anger leaves no room for self reflection; agitation and anger only grow throughout his book.
- ❖ Habakkuk, in the light of God opens himself to hear God and be redirected. The anger is real, but with a different outcome.

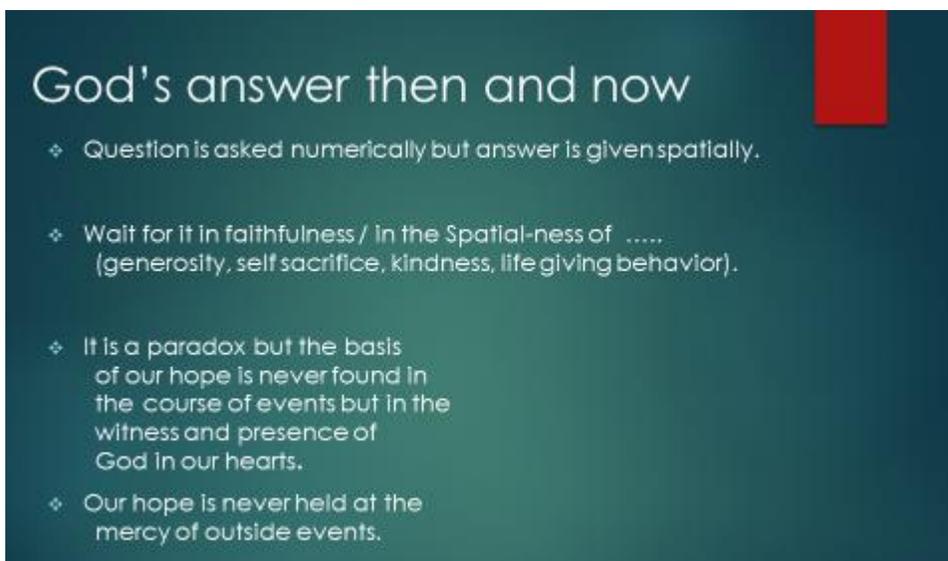
Nahum & Habakkuk: As Nahum looks out, he is angry at the Assyrians. Habakkuk is angry at God. But here is the biggest difference. Nahum's anger leaves little room for self-reflection. Locked into his self-righteous view that blames those "out there, his agitation and anger only grows throughout his book. Habakkuk, in the light of God opens himself to hear God and be redirected. The anger is real, but it is different.



Nahum and Habakkuk

- ❖ Nahum believes that no harm will come to him because God is with him and he doesn't deserve it.
- ❖ Habakkuk has heard God say, harm will come, even though you don't deserve it....but God is with him.

Nahum & Habakkuk: Nahum believes that no harm will come to him because God is with him and besides, he doesn't deserve it. Habakkuk has heard God say, harm will come, even though you don't deserve it....but I am with you. Now I'm not trying to hold Nahum in a bad light, it is just that he is simply more nationalistic than Habakkuk....and it shows. But it also shows that when one is nationalistic, there is less room for self-reflection, less room to hear God's voice in a different way.



God's answer then and now

- ❖ Question is asked numerically but answer is given spatially.
- ❖ Wait for it in faithfulness / In the Spatial-ness of (generosity, self sacrifice, kindness, life giving behavior).
- ❖ It is a paradox but the basis of our hope is never found in the course of events but in the witness and presence of God in our hearts.
- ❖ Our hope is never held at the mercy of outside events.

God's Answer Then and Now: And so God says wait for it in the spatial -ness of Generosity, Self-sacrifice, Kindness, Life Giving Behaviors. Because as you wait in this kind of posture, it allows you to encounter God in that space. It allows one to survive in incredibly difficult situations. It is not that your anger and sorrow disappears. It is not that your sense of injustice disappears. No, it is just that you encounter the God who is working at restoration in the midst of a broken world and you are not alone. It

allows us to meet God in that waiting. It allows us to trust that God is working in this world during this time of waiting.

And that is the paradox of this whole thing. Our basis of hope is never found in the course of events but in the witness and presence of God in our hearts. Our hope, our assurance is never at the mercy of the movement of life around us. Rather it is found in the witness and presence of God in our own hearts. It's not out there. It is in here. Two prophets, one event....two very different responses. One prophet, Nahum, his hope was determinative of what would happen out there. The other, Habakkuk, not so much out there for the moment, but in here.

And that really is at the heart of this book. And it is really at the heart of what is going on for us in our moments and our days as we grapple with hard stuff. Now, is Habakkuk the definitive word on our struggles? No, but he is painting an important picture for us to see. He is giving us a hook on which to hang our really tough questions. And so I close our time together by saying this way.

**Habakkuk ~ a picture of a heart
that loves God, rather than
merely the blessings God gives**

❖ Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines...
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of
my salvation.

God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the
feet of a deer, and makes
me tread upon the heights.
(Habakkuk 3:17a, 18-19).

Habakkuk, a picture of a heart that loves God, rather than merely the blessings God gives--of a heart that rejoices in God the giver, rather than merely in the gifts of God. It is a picture of one who knows life will inevitably bring low moments but that these low moments are not signs that God has abandoned us. Rather, the righteous trust that God will in fact find us in our suffering. And the result of this taking root in our hearts? Habakkuk sums it up the best.

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines...
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
and makes me tread upon the heights
(Habakkuk 3:17a, 18-19 / NRSV).

Friends near and far, May you be lifted up, as you cling to God this week. Grace, Mercy and Peace to you.

