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Habakkuk, Chapter 1, NIV, abbreviated

1 The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

Habakkuk's Complaint

- 2 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.*
- 4 The law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous.*

The LORD's Answer

- 5 "Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.*
- 6 For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,
that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth,
to seize dwellings not their own.*
- 7 They are dreaded and fearsome;
their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.*
- 8 Their horses are swifter than leopards,
more fierce than the evening wolves;*
- 9 They all come for violence,
all their faces forward.
They gather captives like sand.*
- 10 At kings they scoff,
and at rulers they laugh.*
- 11 Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god!"*

Whose own might is their god.

All we know of Habakkuk, who is known as one of the so-called minor prophets because the Book of Habakkuk is so short, is what appears in his book. We don't know who his father was, which king ruled over him, or his hometown. It is believed, based on the contents of the book, that he was a sort of cult prophet, that he was based in the Temple, and that he had a strong local following. An intriguing aspect of his writings is that Habakkuk openly questions the wisdom of God. But he certainly prophesizes that the righteous can count on being vindicated in the end and that evil people can count on perpetual punishment administered directly by God. Parts of the Book of Habakkuk were probably used in worship services, especially parts of the very poetic third chapter of his book. The Book of Habakkuk is intended for those who are caught in a waiting period. God has made a promise – and it is yet to be fulfilled. We have turned to God – but we have not yet felt the touch of God's grace in return. The Book of Habakkuk is about patience and waiting for God to decide when the time is right. Most of all, the Book of Habakkuk tells us that whether it is punishment or a blessing – God will indeed answer in time.

The most significant historical event referenced in the Book of Habakkuk that helps us date its writing is the invasion of the Babylonians, which is

prophesized in the book. Interestingly, Habakkuk refers to the Babylonians as Chaldeans, who were a people living in southern Babylon; this is part of southern Iraq today. The Chaldeans were a semi-nomadic tribe, and it was common at the time for Babylonians in general to be referred to as Chaldeans. Habakkuk refers to the impending invasion of Judah, the southern part of Israel, which includes Jerusalem, and so this dates the Book of Habakkuk to between 612 and 598 B.C. However, the writing strongly suggests that the writer is aware that Babylon's control of Israel will be fleeting, and so perhaps the writing was done later. It's more likely that Habakkuk's writings were created over a period of time and only later compiled together and then placed into the collection of Jewish spiritual writings. Habakkuk pleads with God to end violence and punish the wicked:

- ² *O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not hear?
Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.*
- ⁴ *The law is paralyzed,
and justice never goes forth.
For the wicked surround the righteous.*

Here is God's response to Habakkuk:

- ⁵ *"Look among the nations, and see;
wonder and be astounded.*
- ⁶ *For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,
that bitter and hasty nation,
who march through the breadth of the earth,*

- to seize dwellings not their own.*
- ⁷ *They are dreaded and fearsome;
their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.*
- ⁸ *Their horses are swifter than leopards,
more fierce than the evening wolves;*
- ⁹ *They all come for violence,
all their faces forward.
They gather captives like sand.*
- ¹⁰ *At kings they scoff,
and at rulers they laugh.*
- ¹¹ *Then they sweep by like the wind and go on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god!"*

Habakkuk knows that his people have become corrupt and sinful. The justice system of the Israelites has come to serve evil, not good. Indeed, justice has been perverted so that those who break the law of God are the ones who are rewarded. God replies that yes, this is true – and God will use the Babylonians to motivate the Israelites to find their way back to God. In Chapter 2 of this three-chapter book, Habakkuk makes it clear that in the end, God’s people will be restored. They will come back to God. It is the Babylonians – and all those who do harm to others – who will suffer. Here is an edited version of what Habakkuk prophesizes will happen to any people who oppress other peoples and who worship human made idols instead of the living God:

- Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own!*
- ⁸ *Because you have plundered many nations,
all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you.*
- ⁹ *Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house!*

- 12 Woe to him who builds a town with blood
and founds a city on iniquity!*
- 16 You will have your fill of shame instead of glory.*
- 18 What profit is an idol
when its maker has shaped it,
a metal image, a teacher of lies?*
- 19 Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake;
to a silent stone, Arise!
Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver,
and there is no breath at all in it.*

There is something very critical to note about the Book of Habakkuk: the author's primary goal is not to prophesize that God will always punish evil and that we must repent. That is a common message in the Old Testament, and we have seen this in multiple places in the Bible, with God using foreign armies to punish the wayward Israelites and bring them back to God. But Habakkuk's message is not a negative message. Habakkuk wants us to live productive, active, and abundant lives. Indeed, the purpose of God enforcing God's laws is to protect us, to ensure that we can be the recipient of the gifts that God offers. God promises that if we are faithful, if we treat other humans and their property with respect, we will be blessed. In fact, our ability to find joy lies within us because God is within us; we don't depend on the world around us to give us hope and peace. If we do live moral, ethical lives, Habakkuk tells us that even in times of pain and deprivation, God brings us joy. The Book of Habakkuk's third and final chapter contains a

prayer of his. It is written as a hymn or a song, and there are instructions on how to perform it embedded in the song. Many scholars believe that this material is a very ancient prayer dating back to the early days of the Israelite people and that it was inserted into Habakkuk. Here is its ending:

- 17 Though the fig tree should not blossom,
nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail
and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold
and there be no herd in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
19 GOD, the Lord, is my strength;
he makes my feet like the deer's;
he makes me tread on my high places.*

In the messages that I've given in this church, we have seen the cycle of freedom and enslavement that confronted the people of God over a period of thousands of years. When they were free, their nation was a theocracy, and the goal was that their judges and then their kings would enforce God's laws, not laws that originated with people. But when they stopped living this way, when they became corrupt, God sent in other nations to punish them, to motivate them to return to God. No matter what evil the People of God fall into, God pursues them. What Habakkuk is saying is that God has a magnificent purpose in

remaining in the lives of the Israelites, of never abandoning them even when they abandon God. Compare the following two views on human strength. First, this is how God, through the mouth of Habakkuk, describes powerful people who conquer and manipulate and enslave others. This comes from our passage today, from the beginning of Habakkuk: *Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!*” That’s who their god is – their own physical and political power. But people who live in a way that’s consistent with the laws that God has laid down for us, we are strong, too. Here is the second view, from the end of Habakkuk. Rather than our god being our strength, we get our strength directly from God: *GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.*

One of my biggest frustrations when I was a professor at the University of Colorado in Boulder was the brutal politics and the lack of human decency. I started out no different than any other academic doing everything I could to promote myself – which is what is demanded of professors in most research-oriented universities. If you are an academic, it is all about you, how much you can bring in in research dollars, how many papers you can publish, how many Ph.D. students you can place in prominent places. I took to heart the advice I was given by my superiors and put extremely little emphasis on teaching. It

worked, too. I was very successful, and I was promoted to full professor at a very young age. But God blessed me. God sent in the Chaldeans in the form of an eye disease that caused me to incrementally lose my vision over a period of a couple decades. Then, when I was suddenly the person who was in need, I saw the academics around me for who they really were. They wouldn't accommodate me in the slightest by giving me a teaching assistant to help grade assignments that I couldn't read. I found myself having to do everything I did before, but with very, very limited vision. They had no humanity; they didn't care about me as a person. The university only cared what I could do for it. To be honest, I am confident that they broke the Americans with Disabilities Act. But God sent the Chaldeans after me for a reason. God was reminding me that my god wasn't my brute strength, what I could do with my own eyes; rather my strength comes from my God. I discovered the joy of being a sincere, hardworking teacher who cared deeply about students. I began to be more concerned with training young people than with promoting myself as an academic. I renewed my relationship with God.

A year ago, I was walking down a corridor at Boulder Community Hospital. I was getting back to some referrals to see patients after answering a call for a full trauma in the ER. A young man had been riding a bike when he was hit by a car. He was dead when he arrived at the hospital. His young widow had been in the

ER and had needed someone to be with her. As I was headed back to the chaplains' office, I placed a call to someone at the Pierce Church to offer some support over a family crisis. I talked to that person for several minutes as I walked through the hospital, and then just as I was hanging up, I realized that I recognized someone who was standing in a waiting area. It was a professor from my department at CU. He was a bit older than me and had retired about the same time I retired. I stopped and said hello. Remember, I had just witnessed a tragic death and had talked someone through a very sad personal experience. But this professor, I noticed, had a curious look on his face. Then he said, "Buzz, I've never seen you looking so calm and at peace like you are now." That says it all. Please pray with me.

God, don't let us fall for that ancient call of evil, the temptation to become as powerful and ruthless as possible, and to see our strength as our god. Rather, let us realize that you are our strength. Let us see that you do not pursue us through life in order to punish us, to police us. You are with us every second of every day because you want us to accept your grace and to accept the incredible blessing we receive when we listen to you, when we let you give us the strength that we need to survive the tough times, to live in joy always, and to feel the blessing of passing your grace on to others. Amen.