

## **WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE WE TO DO?**

**Hab 3:1-19**

**Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road**

**Plymouth, Michigan 48170**

**Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 03.30.2003**

“You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come” (Matt 24:6, NIV). So spoke Jesus Christ, and such has been and will be the way of this world until the One who spoke those words returns.

Yes, I am weary with the warring ways of this world. Two weeks ago, we began a study of the Book of Habakkuk. Like us, the prophet wants to know, “What in the world *is* God doing?” Habakkuk was employed in the Jerusalem temple as a prophet who composed oracles and songs for the service of worship that took place there. He worked and wrote during the time when the great Chaldean king, Nebuchadnezzar, was threatening the freedom of Judah, sometime near 600 B.C. In a time of turmoil, terror, and tragedy, Habakkuk asks God how much longer injustice and violence will triumph. God responds that He will use the Chaldeans<sup>1</sup>—the Babylonians—as His instrument of judgment on the perpetrators of injustice and violence in Judah. But God’s answer raises even more questions for Habakkuk. How can a good God use a wicked nation to punish His wayward people? God again responds: the foreign nation used as an instrument of judgment will itself be judged, while in Judah the righteous remnant will survive through their steadfast faith. Habakkuk’s crisis of faith is caused by his faith. His faith raises the questions he seeks to answer by his faith. “What is this world coming to?” is his question and the question of every faithful soul like him. We, like Habakkuk, have come to God wanting to know *what He is doing*, and God turns it back on us wanting to know *what we*

---

<sup>1</sup>“Chaldeans” refers to the tribes in southern Babylon who took control of the state in 627 B.C. and engineered its return to strength and freedom from Assyrian control. The newly powerful Babylon sacked and destroyed the great cities of Asshur (614 B.C.) and Nineveh (612 B.C.), and eventually took on the Egyptians in conflict at the Battle of Carchemish (605 B.C.). The Book of Habakkuk probably dates from the reign of the Judean king Jehoiakim II (609-598 B.C.). Nebuchadnezzar subjugated Jerusalem in 597 B.C. and eventually destroyed the city in 587/586 B.C.

are going to do. We are not told why but how: how to live in the world as it is—“*the righteous live by their faith*” (2:4).

The statement of Hab 2:4, best translated “the righteous live by their faithfulness,”<sup>2</sup> is similar in some ways to Gen 15:6<sup>3</sup> where it is said that God reckoned Abraham (at the time, his name was Abram) to be righteous because Abraham believed in God. Like Abraham, the righteous are those who put their faith in a faithful God; they place their trust in the trustworthy promises of God. *The faithfulness of the righteous is founded upon the faithfulness of God.* For Habakkuk, faithfulness means continuing to cling to God, even when he does not understand God’s actions, even when God’s timing appears to be a lack of any kind of action at all. For Habakkuk, as we see elsewhere in Scripture, there is no separation of faith, what we believe, from faithfulness, how we behave. To have faith means to believe God’s promises and to behave as if they are going to be fulfilled. To have faith means to go on living faithfully even though God has not yet straightened everything out for us. *The righteous live by God’s promise and not by their own power.*

The life of faith does not require reason to be rejected, as Habakkuk’s persistent questioning makes clear. But the life of faith may require continuing to believe, even though reason has been exhausted. In the words of Blaise Pascal (A.D. 1623–1662 – French mathematician, scientist, and philosopher), “Faith certainly tells us what the senses do not, but not the contrary of what they see; it is above, not against them.”<sup>4</sup> Faith does not contradict the senses; but faith does see what the senses cannot see.

---

<sup>2</sup>“Faithfulness” is suggested by a footnote in the NIV, NRSV, and NLT (cf. TANAKH’s translation “fidelity”). The REB has: “the righteous will live by being faithful” (cf. TEV). A very literal translation would be: “but a righteous (man) by his faithfulness shall live” (וְצַדִּיק בְּאֱמֻנָתוֹ יֵחִי – *wəšaddîq be’ēmûnātô yiḥyeh*). Admittedly, there is some ambiguity as to whose faithfulness is meant: is it the faithfulness of the righteous or the faithfulness of God? The LXX (Septuagint–Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) apparently takes the meaning to be God’s faithfulness: “but the righteous (man) by My faithfulness shall live” (ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεώς μου ζήσεται – *ho de dikaios ek pisteōs mou zēsetai*). However, another LXX reading refers to the faithfulness of the righteous: “but My righteous (man) by faithfulness shall live” (ὁ δὲ δίκαιος μου ἐκ πίστεώς ζήσεται – *ho de dikaios mou ek pisteōs zēsetai* – as quoted in Heb 10:38; cf. Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11). Perhaps a *double entente* is involved: the faithfulness of the righteous is founded upon the faithfulness of God.

<sup>3</sup>Gen 15:6 is also somewhat ambiguous. Who reckoned whom? Did Abram consider God to be righteous or did God consider Abram to be righteous? Far more likely is the traditional understanding that God reckoned Abram to be righteous. This is the understanding of Paul and James in the New Testament.

<sup>4</sup>Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (trans. A. J. Krailsheimer; Penguin, 1966), 85, no. 185. Cf. John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, A Library of Modern Religious Thought (ed. I. T. Ramsey; Stanford

The Book of Habakkuk comes to a close with a vision and a prayer. The prophet is taken “back to the future”: Habakkuk sees the future as if it has already happened. The psalm of chapter 3, both the conclusion and climax of the book, is not so much an account of the vision as it is Habakkuk’s response to the vision. In form, content, and its instructions for performance,<sup>5</sup> the psalm is clearly a song intended to be sung in worship. Let’s read it together.

<sup>3:1</sup>A prayer of the prophet Habakkuk according to Shigionoth.

<sup>2</sup>O LORD, I have heard of your renown,  
and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work.

In our own time revive it;  
in our own time make it known;  
in wrath may you remember mercy.

<sup>3</sup>God came from Teman,  
the Holy One from Mount Paran. *Selah*  
His glory covered the heavens,  
and the earth was full of his praise.

<sup>4</sup>The brightness was like the sun;  
rays came forth from his hand,  
where his power lay hidden.

<sup>5</sup>Before him went pestilence,  
and plague followed close behind.

<sup>6</sup>He stopped and shook the earth;  
he looked and made the nations tremble.

The eternal mountains were shattered;  
along his ancient pathways  
the everlasting hills sank low.

<sup>7</sup>I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction;  
the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled.

<sup>8</sup>Was your wrath against the rivers, O LORD?

Or your anger against the rivers,  
or your rage against the sea,  
when you drove your horses,  
your chariots to victory?

<sup>9</sup>You brandished your naked bow,  
sated were the arrows at your command. *Selah*  
You split the earth with rivers.

<sup>10</sup>The mountains saw you, and writhed;  
a torrent of water swept by;  
the deep gave forth its voice.

---

University, 1958), 9-10: Locke’s distinction between “above, contrary, and according to reason.”

<sup>5</sup>Note the musical and liturgical terms “Shigionoth” (v. 1) and “Selah” (vv. 3, 9, 13), and 19b—“To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.”

The sun raised high its hands;  
<sup>11</sup>the moon stood still in its exalted place,  
 at the light of your arrows speeding by,  
 at the gleam of your flashing spear.  
<sup>12</sup>In fury you trod the earth,  
 in anger you trampled nations.  
<sup>13</sup>You came forth to save your people,  
 to save your anointed.  
 You crushed the head of the wicked house,  
 laying it bare from foundation to roof. *Selah*  
<sup>14</sup>You pierced with his own arrows the head of his warriors,  
 who came like a whirlwind to scatter us,  
 gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding.  
<sup>15</sup>You trampled the sea with your horses,  
 churning the mighty waters.□  
<sup>16</sup>I hear, and I tremble within;  
 my lips quiver at the sound.  
 Rottenness enters into my bones,  
 and my steps tremble beneath me.  
 I wait quietly for the day of calamity  
 to come upon the people who attack us.□  
<sup>17</sup>Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
 and no fruit is on the vines;  
 though the produce of the olive fails  
 and the fields yield no food;  
 though the flock is cut off from the fold  
 and there is no herd in the stalls,  
<sup>18</sup>yet I will rejoice in the LORD;  
 I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
<sup>19</sup>GOD, the Lord, is my strength;  
 he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
 and makes me tread upon the heights.

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.

*Like Job, the answer given to Habakkuk is not an explanation from God but an encounter with God.* The vision is of the victory gained, when evil is no more and those faithful, who have relied on God, have inherited His kingdom.

Habakkuk had a vision. But what does that mean beyond being terrifying to the one who experiences it and mystifying to those who have never known such things? The vision has meaning, to the prophet and to his people, because Habakkuk can identify the God of his encounter as the God of the Exodus. He recognizes this God as more than fire and smoke because this God has revealed Himself by what He has done for His people in

history. This God is the One who brought Israel out of Egyptian bondage (the Red Sea experience recalled in vv. 8, 13-15), led them through the wilderness (Teman and Paran), and brought them to the Promised Land (Cushan and Midian). Habakkuk speaks of a God who is *known*, not so much through visions, but through events in history which the whole people have experienced and remember. *These stories of the past are celebrated not merely in memory, but also in anticipation: what God has done, He will do again.* The God who acted in the past is the same God who will act again.

The same can be said for Christians. When we think about the essence of what God really means to us, we talk about a man who lived on this earth in a datable period of our history—Jesus of Nazareth. We talk about His birth, His ministry, His crucifixion, and His resurrection from the dead. For how else do we really know about God? He provides no theophanies for us in our churches. When we gather we do not see Him or hear Him speak aloud. But we know God by what He *has done*, and on that basis we believe in what He *will do*. The past . . . it provides the power for the present and the promise for the future. Whatever anyone may say about God, His existence or His nature, there *was* an Exodus and there *was* a Jesus of Nazareth, and nothing can change that.

We cannot fully understand Hab 2:4—“the righteous live by their faith” —until we begin to understand Hab 3:17-19. After all, what is faith? The former scripture does not say, but the latter scripture makes clear what it means to live by faith and to be faithful in our living.

<sup>17</sup>Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold  
and there is no herd in the stalls,  
<sup>18</sup>yet I will rejoice in the LORD;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
<sup>19</sup>GOD, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and makes me tread upon the heights.

Habakkuk’s outward circumstances are no different from what they were at the beginning. But Habakkuk knows God: he knows that the God who has acted, will act

again. *Fear gives way to faith, and Habakkuk exclaims, “Even though I starve to death, yet I will rejoice in the LORD!”*

For those who, like myself, trust in God to deliver us from evil, the question, “What if deliverance does not come?” is deadly serious. In wrestling with that question, we may lose our faith or we may live by our faith. Like Habakkuk, the deliverance I desperately desire may not come in my lifetime. So be it . . . “yet I will rejoice in the LORD.” I *know* what God has done for me in the past. I *know* that God is with me in the present. Therefore, I *know* that the kingdom of this world will become “the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15).

Habakkuk is a prophet for all faithful people, of whatever time, who find themselves living “between the times”—in the time between the revelation of the promises of God and the realization of those promises. Countless souls who have shared Habakkuk’s faith have found Habakkuk’s joy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (A.D. 1906–1945 – German theologian and Lutheran pastor) wrote these words from his Nazi prison cell: “By good powers wonderfully hidden, we await cheerfully, come what may.” Charles Haddon Spurgeon (A.D. 1834–1892 – English Baptist preacher), in a sermon on the last chapter of Habakkuk, eloquently stated:

. . . We have been assured by people who think they know a great deal about the future that awful times are coming. Be it so; it need not alarm us, for the Lord reigneth. If the worst comes to the worst, our refuge is in God; if the heavens shall fall the God of heaven will stand; when God cannot take care of His people under heaven He will take them above the heavens, and there they shall dwell with Him. Therefore, as far as you are concerned, rest; for you shall stand . . . at the end of the days.<sup>6</sup>

God *is* at work in our world. His Kingdom *is* coming. In the meantime, and for evermore, *the righteous will live by their faithfulness.*

---

Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4,” in Roger E. Van Harn, ed., *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday’s Texts—The Old Testament and Acts* (Eerdmans/Continuum, 2001), 497-500.

Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum—Malachi*, Interpretation (John Knox Press, 1986).

---

<sup>6</sup>Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “‘The Middle Passage’ (Hab. 3:2),” in *The Treasury of the Bible*, vol. IV (Baker, 1981), 723.

- Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching from the Minor Prophets: Texts and Sermon Suggestions* (Eerdmans, 1998).
- David W. Baker, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 23b (InterVarsity Press, 1988).
- Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets—Volume 2: Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, Daily Study Bible (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1985).
- Donald E. Gowan, *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk* (John Knox Press, 1976).
- Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 1 (Harper Colophon Books, 1962).
- Jack P. Lewis, *The Minor Prophets* (Baker Book House, 1966).
- John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, A Library of Modern Religious Thought (ed. I. T. Ramsey; Stanford University, 1958).
- The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1979).
- Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (trans. A. J. Krailsheimer; Penguin, 1966).
- J. J. M. Roberts, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, Old Testament Library (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).
- Ralph L. Smith, *Micah—Malachi*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 32 (Word Books, 1984).
- P. J. M. Sutherland, “Habakkuk, Theology of,” in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Zondervan, 1997), 4:688-690.
- Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “‘The Middle Passage’ (Hab. 3:2),” in *The Treasury of the Bible*, vol. IV (Baker, 1981).
- Marvin A. Sweeney, “Habakkuk, Book of,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday, 1992), 3:1-6.
- Mark Water, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations* (Baker, 2000).
- Kyle M. Yates, *Preaching from the Prophets* (Broadman Press, 1942).