

“The just shall live by faith”

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-5, 18-20

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Habakkuk is a very short book, just three chapters; you could read it all the way through in 15 minutes or less (and I'd encourage you to do that sometime this week). If you're feeling like the quote I've used as a sermon title seems familiar even though you may not have read Habakkuk, you're not wrong: those words are quoted, not once, not twice, but three times in the writings that make up the New Testament.* So that alone might suggest that it'd be worthwhile to pay some attention to this little book.

There's not much anybody can tell us with certainty about the author or the exact circumstances of its writing, although from clues in the text most scholars date it around 600 BCE, or roughly 2,600 years ago. That puts it at about the time, maybe a little before, when the Babylonian empire which had become dominant in the region decided to put down all resistance from the people of Judah. Their armies moved in, destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and deported a lot of the people, especially leaders and skilled workers, to Babylon – devastating both the exiles and those left behind. That didn't happen out of the blue; for quite a long time prior, the people of Jerusalem and the rest of Judah had been living under the control of one or another of the more powerful surrounding nations who were competing for territory and using force to conquer and get tribute from occupied areas. So the context of Habakkuk is a troubled time, with every reason to anticipate that things will get worse.

His book is a bit unique in that it's considered one of the prophetic books – that is, a writing by or about someone who brings a message from God – but it also has similarities to the Psalms and to wisdom literature. Like the Psalms, part of this book is clearly a song meant to be sung to God. Like other wisdom literature from the Bible, such as Job or Ecclesiastes, much of Habakkuk is questions and lament.

The book is presented in the form of a dialogue between the prophet and God. Habakkuk asks the question we have all asked at one time or another: “Why?”

He looks around him at the violence, destruction, strife, and injustice in his world and wonders why God allows it. He understands that these things are an affront to God (in fact, he *reminds* God of this!)

“How long, O Lord?” he says (echoing some of the Psalms of lament). Why don't you do something? Why do evil people get away with harming the innocent? Why do the powerful show no mercy to the vulnerable? Why is there no end to the greed of the rich? Why does nothing seem to change? Is it God's doing, a form of punishment?

Habakkuk is wrestling with what we call “the problem of evil.” We affirm that God is good. We believe that God is powerful. We acknowledge that evil is real. That leaves us with a conundrum: how can all three of those things be true? If one of them isn’t true, we might still be unhappy with our situation but at least it’s no longer a puzzle we can’t solve. But wanting to hold the truth of all three of those things is a challenge to faith.

Habakkuk is a book about faith. The prophet is a person of faith, not someone getting ready to reject faith or tear it down. That’s important to understand, so that we can remember that *our* questions and struggles, our “why?”s, don’t negate our faith. In fact, they keep us from a couple of common pitfalls approaching faith. One is a kind of Pollyanna-ish denial that says, “oh, everything will be fine if you just have faith that God will take care of it.” Another says “Well, whatever’s happening must be God’s will and we can’t do anything about it” ... what one of our hymns calls “weak resignation to the evils we deplore.” Asking why, mourning the hurts we see around us, acknowledging our struggles, trying to understand how and where God is present – that wrestling helps us develop a faith that’s more honest, more robust, and more engaged with God and with the world.

Habakkuk is not willing to be in denial. He’s not willing to resign himself to the triumph of evil. But he’s not going to give up on God, either. So he pours out his complaint to God, and he waits to see what God will show him.

Spoiler alert: Habakkuk does not get an answer to his “why?” He doesn’t get an explanation from God, or come up with one of his own.

He does get this - I don’t quite know what to call it – this word of encouragement? promise? “The righteous (or just) will live by faith.” In Hebrew, it’s just three words: righteous, faith, live.

“Righteous” doesn’t mean an especially good person; in Hebrew this is about right relationship with God and others.

“Faith” refers to both trusting God and living faithfully; congruence of belief and behavior is assumed.

“Live,” in Hebrew thought, means not mere existence, but being fully and richly alive.

The just will live by faith.

In the middle section of chapter two, the part we didn’t read, there is a sort of poem that reminds Habakkuk (and us) that there are many *other* ways to live – ways that are not faith, that are not righteous, and that, ultimately are not fully and richly alive:

Alas for you who amass wealth that’s not really yours.

Alas for you who live safe and comfortable lives by separating yourself from the less privileged.

Alas for you who’ve built your communities on violence and injustice.

Alas for you who profit by taking advantage of the weakness of others.

“Alas” because, no matter what it looks like in the here and how, living by any of these priorities is ultimately a destructive choice. It’s idolatry that puts trust in something that is not God.

We live in a world that tells us other ways to live, too. Some of the same ones Habakkuk witnessed, in fact, but also we

...that we live by our wits, our intellect, our knowledge, our skills,

...that we live by our hard work and accomplishments and success,

...that we live by our fears, and by finding ways to defend ourselves from the people, the ideas, the situations, and changes that make us afraid,

...that we live by being in control and doing what we want,

...that we live by pleasure, fun, entertainment, escape, avoidance of pain or negativity,

...that we live by the image we present to the world.

But what Habakkuk acknowledges is as true as ever: these are all idols, constructs of our own making, not worthy of our trust, not life-giving. They’re not God.

Habakkuk doesn’t get his answers; but he ends up, somehow at a place where he simply says, more or less, “God is God. Everybody and everything – just be silent in the presence of God.”

He chooses to live by faith.

Is it because he sees that living by other lights is not a rich and connected and fully-human life? Is it because he recognizes that despite all the horrendous evil that the world has seen, all the attempts to destroy what is good and pervert justice... goodness and a determination to seek justice live on? Is it the memory of God’s saving actions on behalf of his people in the past? Is it because he could be in the presence of God with his anguish, and feel that God heard him? I don’t know.

But after that silence before the mystery of God, Habakkuk offers a song that is also a prayer. Chapter 3 begins:

“O LORD, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work.” (Habakkuk 3:2a)

He goes on to sing about ways God’s people have witnessed God’s power, and, yes, sometimes God’s anger, but also God’s protection and rescue, and most of all, God’s presence. He – kind of tentatively – hopes that God will intervene against the enemies of his people, but seems to

acknowledge that he cannot know exactly what will happen, or how and when God might act in the world.

The song ends like this, Habakkuk's commitment to live by faith, even in hard times:

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,
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 3:17-19)

That's a radical faith. That's a faith honest and deep and robust enough for us today, too.

**Romans 1:7; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38*

Resource:

The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk, by Donald E. Gowan, 1975.