

Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

G. Habakkuk: The puzzled historian

Activity 8.10

Read the book of Habakkuk

What features of the book particularly strike you? What do you think is its main message?

The prophet Habakkuk probably lived in the reign of Jehoiakim, which would place him in the time of Jeremiah. As we know, injustice and oppression thrived, much of it sponsored by the king and his court (see Jeremiah 22:13-17). Babylon had just risen to the status of major world power, having defeated the Egyptians in 605 B.C. at the battle of Carchemish.

Habakkuk differs from most other prophetic books in that the bulk of the messages are not oracles to be preached to the people. Perhaps this was because it was too dangerous to do so. Rather, the first two chapters are the record of a conversation between Habakkuk and God in which the prophet tries to understand God's purpose. The text is a fascinating insight into the calling of a prophet, who is charged to interpret for the God's people the hand of God in their fortunes. He sees the movements of history going on around him and is trying to puzzle out the purpose of God.

1:2-4 is a prayer to Yahweh about the situation of Judah. There is violence and wrongdoing; the law is flouted by the powerful: 'The law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgement comes forth perverted' (verse 4). So the prophet asks Yahweh what he is going to do to remedy the situation.

In 1:5-11 comes the surprising answer to his question. Yahweh is bringing the Chaldeans to be his instrument of judgement. 'Look at the nations and see! Be astonished! Be astounded! ... I am rousing the Chaldeans ...' Judah is to be punished and the Babylonians are to be God's instrument of punishment.

But this answer provokes another question, in 1:12-17. The Babylonians are worse than Judah! How is it that Yahweh is prepared to use them, of all people, to punish Judah? 'Your eyes are too pure to behold evil and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?' (1:13).

This leads to 2:1-5, the centre of the book. Habakkuk has asked the \$64,000 question: If God is holy, how can he accomplish his purpose through the actions of men, women and nations when all of these are sinful? In verse 1, he puts himself into an attitude of hearing: metaphorically, he climbs his watchtower to look out for the answer; he makes hearing the voice of the Lord his main preoccupation, something we all need to be prepared to do if we want to answer the deep questions of faith.

In verse 2, Yahweh tells him to that the answer is on its way. Habakkuk is to get ready to publish it on a notice-board big enough for someone to read running – for us it might be on a hoarding by the side of a motorway.

In verse 3 the answer arrives: it is 'Wait!' The vision is for a time still to come. Yahweh's purpose is not yet complete. In the meantime we are living in an 'interim' age, in which Yahweh is quite content to use wicked people to accomplish his purpose. In this age, in which righteousness and wickedness are mixed together, the righteous person is to live 'by his faith' (verse 4), by which is meant 'faithfulness', 'trustworthiness' or 'moral steadfastness'. She or he should live an upright life, loyal to Yahweh, knowing that 'the arrogant do not endure' (verse 5).

Another question is implicit in this answer: what is the use of trying to live a righteous life in evil times? This question is answered in the rest of chapter 2, which consists of five woes against the wicked pointing out the futility of bloodshed, violence, oppression and injustice in pursuit of gain. 'God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year' and eventually 'the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the sea is full of water' (verse 14). However many may worship idols of gold and silver, 'the Lord is in his holy temple' (verse 20). The challenge, then, is to live faithful to God in a world of wickedness.

Chapter 3 takes the form of a psalm. It is a prayer of trust for the righteous in evil times, expressing that determination to live faithfully. It is archaic in its language and echoes such ancient hymns as Judges 5 and Psalm 68, leading to an expression of trust:

Habakkuk 3:17-19

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.