

Daily Devotions Monday 6th July

Habakkuk

Introduction

Do you think it is wrong to question God given that he is infinitely wise? We finished our studies in John with Jesus speaking to troubled disciples. They questioned him. We have a gracious God who does not condemn our genuine questions and Habakkuk was a prophet with questions.

We might identify with Habakkuk. He was living in a time when God's law was being ignored. He was surrounded by injustice and he could not see how a loving God was allowing evil and suffering to prevail. The book of Habakkuk is one for our times. Christian persecution is rife. God's laws, especially with regards to the sanctity of life and heterosexual marriage, are paralysed. We don't understand Jewish persecution or diseases that cripple the world!

Like us, Habakkuk knows that God is all powerful and omniscient but still he comes to him with a desperate query. He is frustrated that God is not acting in the world in which he lives.

I pray that as we follow the writings of Habakkuk we will gain a fresh understanding of our relationship with God, his sovereignty and ultimately find the joy of unconditional worship that Habakkuk also found.

As we've gone from Colossians to Ezekiel then to John and now back to Habakkuk I've been struck by the importance of realising that the God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament and that the God of the New Testament is the same as the God of the Old Testament. His nature and character never changes and never will.

The overriding purposes of God are that he will have a people and that he will be their God. This is echoed in Ch. 2 v 14, 'The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.'

Habakkuk had this conversation with God just before the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. He witnessed the rise of the Babylonian empire and struggled to understand how God was going to use such evil to cleanse his people who had turned from him.

Let's put ourselves in the hands of the Holy Spirit as we follow Habakkuk's journey from 'why' to 'worship.'

Habakkuk 1 vs 1-4

There is desperation in the prayer of Habakkuk in these verses. 'I cry out', 'How long', 'Why'. He was as overwhelmed as we sometimes are in our personal prayers and those for the state of our nation. He was living in Jerusalem. Josiah, a righteous king had been succeeded by Jehoiakim who built wealth through oppression and showed no repentance. Priests, politicians and civil servants followed his example. Thank God that our present Queen is faithful to God!!

God's law was paralysed (v4) and injustice was tolerated. People were living on their own terms rather than God's.

More than this, Habakkuk couldn't understand why God wasn't acting. 'You're not saving, you're not listening, you're not tolerating'!

Are we equally bewildered about what God is or isn't doing? A family member not saved. Prayers unanswered. A nation slipping further into godlessness! Let's follow the example of Habakkuk and lay our concerns before him. Let's not believe Satan's lie that God's apparent silence means he is not concerned.

Daily Devotions Tuesday 7th July

Habakkuk 1 vs 1-11(esp. v5)

Here is God's response to Habakkuk's desperate and heartfelt prayer to a seemingly inactive God!

God tells him to 'look' in verse 5. Habakkuk was already looking. In verse 3 he complains to God about 'looking' at injustice. God wants him to look with a different perspective. God's perspective!

Verse 1 suggests that this was the latest of many appeals Habakkuk had prayed and although it appears that God wasn't listening, verse 6 reveals that he was. He was already active. Habakkuk just didn't have the eyes to see it!

God was raising up the Babylonians. They were a wicked and huge military power who had just defeated the combined forces of the Egyptians and Assyrians and was about to invade Israel. God was clearly behind their rise in power.

It's often the case that our focus is too limited to see God's bigger plan. What may appear to us to be a hopeless situation may turn out to be the very way that God works out his purposes.

Remember those 2 years Paul spent in prison in Rome from AD 60-62? The great evangelical preacher deprived of an audience and confined to a cell. It seemed a hopeless situation but it was from here that Paul wrote 6 letters that form a large portion of the New Testament. Paul's situation also meant he could witness to the palace guard and others. Usually he would have 16 soldiers guarding him. Some would be chained to him. A pretty captive audience don't you think? I'd imagine there are people we know we'd like to be chained to until they understood our message of salvation through Christ!! Paul wrote, '...what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.' (Phil 1v12) His situation also encouraged others to be bold in speaking God's word. (Phil 1v14)

God will not be ignorant of any struggles we are taking to him in prayer, nor any frustrations or battles we are facing. He was listening to Habakkuk and he will be listening to us and watching over us.

Let's ask God for a fresh view of our circumstances so that we may look beyond the surface of our lives to see his glorious work unfolding for us according to his plan.

Daily Devotions Wednesday 8th July

Habakkuk 1 vs 1-11 (esp. vs 6-7)

There's a song by Chris De Burgh called Spanish Train. It's a ballad about God and the Devil playing poker to win possession of a dying man's soul! (I know!! But it's only a song!) Here's a verse from it.

'And then the Lord he called for one more card
But he drew the diamond eight
And the Devil said to the son of God
I believe you've got it straight
So deal me one for the time has come
To see who'll be the king of this place
But as he spoke, from beneath his cloak
He slipped another ace'

We were brought up on stories of good verses evil. Cowboys and Indians (for us over 60's), Star Wars, Harry Potter, Batman etc etc.
Is this how we see things? If something good happens God has won the battle. If something bad happens the devil must have won.

This is not what the Bible teaches. God is always in control and here we have an example.

The nations around Habakkuk, that God asked him to look at, were being conquered by the Babylonians. The ancient world power, the Egyptians was crushed. The Assyrians were defeated and their capital city Nineveh taken and ransacked. God himself calls the Babylonians a ruthless and impetuous people. But it was he who was raising them up. He was going to use this wicked nation to discipline Israel. To any onlookers and to the Babylonians themselves, it might seem that their military power was behind their success but it was God who was raising them up for his purposes.

We see something similar in the book of Job. God grants Satan permission to test Job through several trials but God sets the boundaries (Job 1 8-12).

Several parties were responsible for Christ being crucified. Judas, Herod, Pilate, the Pharisees, the Jews and the Gentiles but when the disciples were praying, recorded in Acts 4 v 28, they remind us that God was in control. 'They did what your (God's) power and will had decided beforehand would happen.

That God should use evil to inflict suffering on other for a greater good raises questions that perplex us all. The evidence of the Bible however is clear!

We must acknowledge God's sovereignty over the evil we see around us, be it worldwide killer viruses, terrorist organisations or corrupt administrations.

God is in control and the only reason Satan is allowed to 'slip another ace' is because God has let him!!

Daily devotions Thursday 9th July

Habakkuk 1 vs 12-17 (esp. v12)

Habakkuk in these verses becomes very bold in being critical of God's methods to bring his people back to him. Although, like us, Habakkuk couldn't match God's compassion and forgiveness with his plan to use brutality, he never questions that God has a reason.

In verse 12 Habakkuk is putting his questions into the context of his certainties about God.

- 'Oh Lord are you not from everlasting?' God has always existed. Unlike the world he created, God's history has no beginning. He stands above all the ups and downs of earthly history whilst remaining engaged in it.
- 'O Rock.' His view of God is completely stable and dependable. While things may shake in our uncertain world and uncertain lives, God remains firm and reliable.
- 'My God, My holy one!' Habakkuk's relationship with God was a personal one. They belong to each other. God will never let go of him. He is holy and a covenant keeping God, incapable of making a promise he won't keep. This is a truth is also for us and is not dependent on our moods or ability to take it in.
- 'O Lord you have appointed them' Habakkuk accepts God's purpose in what he is doing.

Despite his questions, fears and uncertainties, Habakkuk affirmed what he knew to be true about God.

Sadly for many churches Christianity is about experiences such as getting emotionally charged up during the repeated singing of choruses. I hope that the absence of such experiences these days will force believers to focus more on what they know to be true of God through his Word.

This is also true for individuals. Martyn Lloyd Jones once said, 'Most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself.'

When we are in difficult situations we need to tell ourselves about the certainties of God's word and allow them to give us confidence in God's sovereignty!

If you have time meditate on some of these certainties. (E.g. Heb. 13v5, Psalm 18v2, Heb. 13v8)

Daily Devotions Friday 10th July

Habakkuk 1 vs 12-17

When I was a youngster whenever I told my Mum I was feeling ill she would give me a spoonful of cod liver oil. It was the most disgusting tasting stuff ever and looking back was probably a good tactic Mum used to stop me ever skiving off school!!

It was definitely a case of the cure being worse than the disease!

In these verses Habakkuk is grappling with a similar problem. The Israelites were sinful and had turned their backs on God but his cure was to use an even more sinful nation to bring them to their senses.

Habakkuk questions how a perfectly pure God who hates sin can tolerate the things the Babylonians would do to their captives. He criticises God for allowing wicked people to ride rough shod over the relatively good people in their control. He uses the imagery of the Israelites being mere sport as fish for the fishermen of Babylonia! (Incidentally, the Babylonians used to insert fish hooks into the lower jaw of their captives as they led them along with chains!). By their catch they were able to rejoice and live in luxury. (v15,16)

The analogy for today is clear. Big businesses with rich bosses on mega bonuses thrive all over the world at the expense of oppressed workers. Even recently the clothing company Boohoo were charged with only paying their workers £3.50 an hour while they worked in poor conditions in small textile factories in Leicester!!

Even on an individual level it's not uncommon to hear of ruthless employers taking advantage of employees to increase their personal revenue!

We are the same as Habakkuk. We can't understand how God can use these present circumstances to fulfil his purposes! There is no easy answer but the example of this passage of scripture is that God's purpose was to turn his people back to him.

It's a sad fact that for many people, it's only when all else has failed or when a situation has become dire that they turn to God in prayer. Remember Louis Zamperini adrift in the Pacific for 47 days?!

Much of the suffering in our world is due to sinful and greedy people. The rest is due to natural disasters. Either way we have to acknowledge that we are not the ones in control.

Doesn't it make sense to turn to the one who is?

We see the effects of the virus on people and the economy. We see wars and famine. We see evil, self centred and corrupt leaders and we see oppression. Usually it's God who gets the blame. But, have we ever considered how much God may have prevented? How many Hitlers or Stalins has he nipped in the bud?

Nor do we see the purposes of God.

I wonder how many more money making 'unsinkable' liners Harland and Wolf would have gone on to make and how many lives would have been lost if God had moved the iceberg out of the way of the Titanic!!

Daily Devotions Saturday 11th July

Habakkuk 1 vs 1-3

In our fast moving lives (though they have slowed recently) patience is not something we have in abundance. If I plant seeds I want to see flowers the next day! We want solutions to problems instantly. To my shame, I complained to Amazon that my next day delivery didn't arrive on that day!! (Did get a free month on Prime from them though!)

Here we see Habakkuk in a completely different mindset from that which we saw at the beginning of chapter 1. Rather than crying out to God, he is now waiting for God's response.

Often in the Old Testament the idea of being on watch is used. We saw it in Ezekiel 3v17 and 33v7. Stone watchtowers were built on city walls or ramparts for the watchmen to look for approaching enemies. They were also built in vineyards to guard the ripening grapes! The image presented, is of someone watching and waiting.

I would imagine a watchtower to be a quiet place with few distractions so that the watchmen could remain alert. For Habakkuk there would probably have been many distractions in Jerusalem that time. He removes himself to a place where he can focus on God.

Having poured out his heart to God earlier he now waits to hear God's reply.

This was a problem beyond Habakkuk's control. There are many problems we face that God has given us the ability to solve but for those we can't we need to turn to God. Habakkuk may well have continued to pray about his concerns but now it is clear that his attitude had changed to one of waiting and being alert.

If we are to learn from this, we need to copy the Habakkuk method. Cry out to God in honesty, then remove ourselves from the situation to a place where we can concentrate on God, then be patient, alert and listen.

'Be still and know that I am God' (Psalm 46 v10)

Waiting is not in our 21st century nature. Think motorway traffic, doctor's waiting rooms, supermarket queues or just the kettle boiling!!

Pray, wait, listen, is a theme used often in the Bible and particularly in Psalms. (Psalm 27v14, 119v166, 130v5)

Again, June is a great example to me in this. I've discovered from our daily chats that her mantra is not, 'Why pray when you can worry?', but, 'Why worry when you can pray?!'