Habakkuk: The Prophet Who Clung onto God

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Prophet Habakkuk's name can be translated as "Clinger" in English. It means someone who holds onto something and wouldn't let go. What the prophet clung onto was God and not any other person or matter. Even though he faced great problems that caused him to trouble and sigh within him, he chose to bring all the difficulties in his heart before God, crying out and inquiring God about them.

Some people called Habakkuk the prophet of faith, because this book recorded Habakkuk's faith journey from questioning to believing. It honestly recorded his initial struggles and eventual maturity. The first and second chapters recorded the two questions the prophet raised to God and God's answers to him. The third chapter is Habakkuk's song of praise to God.

I. Background

A. Habakkuk was born before Babylon invaded the Southern Kingdom Judah, around 600 B.C.. Other prophets in the same time period as him include Jeremiah, Nahum, and Zephaniah. The Northern Kingdom Israel has been destroyed by one of the two great world powers at the time, Assyria in 722 B.C.. Assyria and the other great world power, Egypt, had started their decay by the time Habakkuk started his prophetic ministry, and another great power, Babylon, just began to come into the world stage.

B. Within Judah, the superficial reforms of King Josiah quickly faded as he passed away. Jehoiakim who succeeded him was an ungodly king. During the eleven years of Jehoiakim's rule (609 to 598 B.C.), the society in Judah declined rapidly. People did not fear God and committed idolatry. Judah thus suffered from moral decay that led to rampant injustice and violence in the society. This is the condition of the Kingdom of Judah when Habakkuk served as a prophet of God.

II. Prayers of Interrogation

A. Habakkuk, the Clinger, spent a great amount of time before God praying unceasingly and waited patiently for God to respond back. For at least twenty years, he prayed to God and cried out for Judah and Jerusalem, in the hope that the people would turn from their sins and repent. Yet he saw no sign of revival. That was why he said, "*How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?*" (Hab. 1:2a)

1. Habakkuk's prayers were somewhat different from our so-called intercessory prayer; David Pawson called the prayers of Habakkuk interrogatory prayer.

2. When Habakkuk brought his questions and complaints to God honestly without pretence, God answered Habakkuk's question. For He is a God who answers persistent prayers (Luke 18:1-8). However, God's answers were different from what Habakkuk were expected.

B. The first question Habakkuk raised to God (Hab. 1:2-4) says, in a nutshell, "God, how could You ignore the injustice in Judah and her capital, Jerusalem? How could You do nothing when Your people becoming decadent?" Basically, Habakkuk's complaint was that God did too little.

C. The second question Habakkuk raised to God (Hab. 1:12-2:1) says, "God, how could You use people more wicked than us, the Babylonians, to judge us? If You indeed let the ruthless and impetuous Babylonians attack Judah, Your people would surely die off!" In other words, Habakkuk now accused God of doing too much.

III. God's Answers to Habakkuk

A. God answered Habakkuk's first question (Hab. 1:5-11) by saying, "Look to the nations, and not just your own city. I am raising up Babylonians to attack Judah and to judge My people who sinned against Me. And even though you are now told about this, you still would not believe it." There are two revelations in God's first answer:

1. **God is not just the God of the Jews!** As a Judean prophet, Habakkuk focused only on the corruptions in Judah and Jerusalem, and was not paying much attention to other nations and what God was doing out there. Yet when God answered Habakkuk, his eyes were opened and his vision enlarged. Now he started to see God's deeds more clearly, and he knew more profoundly that God indeed is the Creator of heaven and earth and the Lord over the nations.

2. **God's deeds are beyond what people can fathom!** Habakkuk expected God's salvation and restoration to come to Judah. He never would have thought that God would use a wicked people to judge and punish His own children. Yet when he clung on to God in prayer, God stretched his faith. And Habakkuk began to understand that God's thoughts are greater than ours (Isa. 55:8-9), and that He intends to bring forth righteousness in the nations.

   At this point, Habakkuk's faith was not yet fully matured, and he still had some doubts. But he chose to keep clinging on to God and keep on waiting prayerfully: *I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.* (Hab. 2:1)

B. Before God answered Habakkuk's second question, He told Habakkuk how to receive revelation in a correct manner (Hab. 2:2-3): first Habakkuk was told to write it down, and secondly he needed to trust and not doubt that God's prophecy would come to pass in due time.

1. One way for us to better receive God's revelation is: **to write down God's prophetic words for us**. This helps us to take His words to heart, and also to share with others what He revealed to us more effectively.

2. A right attitude for receiving God's revelation is: **to believe and not doubt**, for God is faithful and He will not lie. Sometimes the prophecy has not fulfilled because it is not God's time yet. Peter said, "But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord

is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:8-9).

C. In Habakkuk 2:4-20, God announced the charges and sentences of the Babylonians. The first half of verse four points out the root of Babylon's sins: their pride. From such root birthed her many iniquities: thief and pillage, plotting to harm, shedding of human blood, promoting violence, drunkenness and debauchery, idolatry, etc..

Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall. (Prov. 16:18)

D. God also promised Habakkuk that His people won't be completely destroyed by the Babylonians. Those who continued to trust in God and be faithful to Him would survive, for ***the just shall live by his faith*** (Hab. 2:4b, NKJV). This short, seven-word promise is the central idea of the entire book of Habakkuk, and the keyword here is faith, which the original Hebrew word is translated to mean faithfulness, loyalty, or fidelity. There are three passages in the New Testament that quotes this promise, and we do need all three to help us understand it more completely.

1. The first two passages talk about the idea of righteousness in relation to faith. For God calls a person righteous not because of the person's own righteousness, and also not because this person obey the law in full. Rather, it is God's righteousness applied to those who keep trusting in Him faithfully.

   For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." (Rom. 1:17)

   Clearly no one who relies on the law is justified before God, because "the righteous will live by faith." (Gal. 3:11)

2. The third passage talks about the meaning of "live". In Habakkuk's time, God promised that righteous faithful remnants would survive the Babylonian invasion. In the New Testament, however, God's promise to believers is the eternal salvation of our spirit and soul, for Jesus Christ will return to establish His everlasting Kingdom!

   37 "For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry. 38 Now the just shall live by faith; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him." 39 But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul. (Heb. 10:37-39, NKJV)

E. Habakkuk 2:6-20 is a taunt song, and it has five stanzas of three verses each. The first verse of each stanza lays out the principle of a curse, basically saying woe to him who does such wickedness. The second verse specifies what Babylon did, and the third verse pronounces a consequence that she would bear or a deed of God.

In short, Babylon would reap her own wrongdoings. For example, she caused ruin and bloodshed, and so she would suffer the same fate in the future. Eventually Babylon would fall, and she was indeed overthrown by the empire of Medes and Persians in 539 B.C.. This verifies a moral law put in place by God, the principle of sowing and reaping that

says, "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Gal. 6:7).

IV. Transformation of Habakkuk's Life

A. Prophet Habakkuk received God's answers to his questions; he thus experienced transformation and breakthrough. First his fear of God was deepened (Hab. 3:2), and his interaction with God changed, which reflected in the style and format of his writing.

1. The third chapter of Habakkuk is a hymn of praise to God. It can roughly be divided into three parts: in the first, the prophet described God's glorious appearance in third person (Hab. 3:3-7); in the second part, the prophet offered his praise to God the righteous judge in second person (Hab. 3:8-15); and in the last part, Habakkuk accounted how God's word had renewed his life in first person (Hab. 3:16-19).

2. Verse one is the title of the hymn, *A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet*. This is a prophetic praise song, and *shigionoth* was a tune that matched the lyrics. The tune was likely to be one that was stirring to people's hearts. The musical notation *selah* appeared three times, and it might mean instrumental break or repeat. The last verse hinted that Habakkuk might be able to play a stringed instrument. Therefore some think that he was a Levite serving in the temple with his music.

B. Habakkuk changed from interrogating God to offering God his song of praise, because he experienced a breakthrough in his faith and the joy in the presence of God. This might be unexpected even to him.

1. **A faith more matured:** Habakkuk finally accepted the prophecy of Babylon's judgment of Judah, and he overcame the barrier of unbelief (Hab. 1:5). Therefore he stopped asking God questions and started to plead with Him. Verse two is an intercessory prayer of the prophet, asking God to repeat His mighty deeds in his days on earth and to remember mercy and salvation in the judgment of His wrath.

   From his initial impatience, then looking suspiciously from the ramparts, and finally waiting peacefully for God's prophecy to come to pass (Hab. 3:16b), Habakkuk became reverently expectant of God's righteous judgment.

2. **A joy incomprehensible:** Habakkuk knew full well that when Babylon invaded, they would kill all living things, including plants and animals. Yet even in such terrible desolation, he could still rejoice in his God! This supernatural joy was what kept him from falling into depression and despair, for the joy of the Lord had become his very strength (Neh. 8:10b; Hab. 3:18-19).

   For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 14:17)