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God in the Hands of Rebellious Christians

You may have noticed the title for this sermon is “God in the Hands of Rebellious Christians” for that essentially is what we have in the first two chapters of Habakkuk.

Habakkuk is about submission. Submission is one of the more difficult callings that God places upon man, whether it be in the context of one’s job, one’s home, an organization, or a church,

it is hard to play “second fiddle” and so to follow the will of another, especially when you question their direction or decision. That is why Paul placed this call upon any and all in a relationship with others:

Colossians 3:23-24, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

The secret to all submission is knowing that ultimately it is NOT man to whom we submit, BUT the Lord! Accordingly, Paul exhorted married women, “Wives, *be subject* to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22). The man who thinks his wife is called in Scripture to submit to him is a misinformed. Women are NOT called ultimately to submit to their husbands, BUT to the Lord!

Minors are exhorted, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1)! Once again, they ought always to keep before them the passion to obey Christ! Those in a working relationship are called, “[to] be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” (Ephesians 6:5-6) Those who are citizens of a nation are exhorted, “Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God...” (Romans 13:1-2a) Understanding this makes submission easy... UNTIL we question the direction or the decisions of God! When that occurs, earthly turmoil becomes child’s play!

That is where God’s providence brought Habakkuk so long ago! In the course of the prophet’s ministry, the Lord revealed His plans for the future and Habakkuk didn’t like it! And so unlike any other prophet before or after him, he contended rather severely with God!¹

The date is 605 B.C. and the nation of Judah is about to be placed in subjection to the Babylonians just like the northern Kingdom of Israel before them. When Habakkuk got wind of God’s plan, the boxing gloves came on!

Habakkuk’s First Accusation: An Unresponsive God

Habakkuk 1:2, “How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out to Thee, ‘Violence!’ Yet Thou dost not save.”

This represents Habakkuk’s first problem with God: God seems inactive and thus uncaring or indifferent. In fact, Habakkuk clearly has taken up Job’s cause in that he appears to be quoting from Job 19:7! In other words, Habakkuk here is likening himself to Job: *God, why are you so far off?! Why don’t you answer me?!*

It is interesting to note that Habakkuk wasn't the first to cry "How long?" in response to man's sin! God Himself was the first. God asked "How long?" when Israel ignored God's grace in granting a double portion of manna for the people of God in light of the Sabbath (Exodus 16:28). God asked "How long?" when the people accepted the report of the blind, foolish spies who said, "God wasn't big enough to conquer the Promised Land" (Numbers 14:11). There is little doubt that God sympathized with Habakkuk here. Furthermore, at the very beginning when God's people demanded a king, the Lord made this promise:

1 Samuel 8:18, "Then you will cry out in that day because of your king whom you have chosen for yourselves, but the Lord will not answer you in that day."

We must see that at this time in redemptive history the Lord was NOT uncaring or indifferent. Clearly He was acting according to His previously promised plan! It is that Habakkuk missed this and continued with his accusations.

Habakkuk 1:3a, "Why dost Thou make me see iniquity, and cause *me* to look on wickedness?..."

"See" and "look" receive the emphasis here! Because of God's unresponsiveness, Habakkuk was forced to dwell among a people of unclean lips! Yet unlike Isaiah (Isaiah 6:5), Habakkuk was not mindful of his own failings and sin. God's "lack of care" resulted in a torturous wait for Habakkuk as he watched God's people as they dove into sin!

Habakkuk 1:3b-4, "...Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises. Therefore, the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted."

God's people had come a long way from where they were at the time of the Judges. In those days, Balaam made the observation that God's people did NOT know "trouble" or "suffering" like other men and nations (Numbers 23:21)- that is how blessed they were! Yet here it was Habakkuk's observation that now this was all God's people knew! Truly, because of their sin, the "good" of Judah had disintegrated into ruin and destruction. It reminds us of what God told Judah:

Jeremiah 5:25, "Your iniquities have turned these away, and your sins have withheld good from you."

Truly, to look upon the land was NOT to see a people you might envy. Rather, it was to see a people most to be pitied! Sadly, Habakkuk laid this at the feet of the Lord! If God weren't so distant, He would have done something to stop the declension! *Yes, God's people are in rebellion. But the worst part of it is that God obviously doesn't care!* That is the first accusation!

God's Response: A Call for Habakkuk to "Look" and "See"

Habakkuk 1:5, "Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days- you would not believe if you were told."

Again the emphasis is on "look" and "observe"/"see." It is what Habakkuk demanded of God in v. 3, "Lord, open your eyes! Why do you make me SEE iniquity and cause me to LOOK on wickedness!" God's response was to say to Habakkuk, "You open your eyes and look and see! If there is anyone who is blind, I assure you it isn't Me!" As to the charge of being "inactive" notice what God says here, "I am doing something in your days- you would not believe if you were told."

Christian, hear this statement. There is little question in my mind that each of us here at some point in our lives is going to find ourselves where Habakkuk was in this text, "*Lord, don't you care? Why don't you do something about it?!*" You must see from this that God is ALWAYS at work in this world bringing about His good purpose! Is God at fault for not consulting you? What was it that God was doing in Habakkuk's day?

Habakkuk 1:6-7, "For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that fierce and impetuous [ill-tempered] people who march throughout the earth [akin to how Satan deceives the nations in Revelation 20:9] to seize dwelling places which are not theirs. They are dreaded [like the bared teeth of a crocodile, Job 41:14] and feared [like a wilderness filled with serpents, scorpions, and drought (Deuteronomy 1:19; 8:15)]. Their justice and authority originate with themselves."

This tells us two things:

1. God was raising up a nation to discipline His people just as He said He would (Deuteronomy 28:41).
2. He knew from the start that this nation was evil and wicked- much more so than His people!

Habakkuk 1:9-10, "All of them come for violence [this was Habakkuk's criticism of his people (v. 2b); now his people would suffer that which they had given to many]. Their horde of faces moves forward. They collect captives like sand. They mock at kings, and rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress, and heap up rubble to capture it."

In other words, Babylon was chosen NOT in spite of their wickedness, BUT because of their wickedness! That is what was necessary in order to discipline the wayward people who bore God's name! In the old days, how did you deal with a neighborhood bully? Get a bigger bully! Talk about an admission.

Habakkuk 1:11, "Then they will sweep through *like* the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god."

From v. 7 we learned that autonomy was a mark of Babylon. And so we see the embodiment of that sin here, the nation and its king didn't fear God! They served themselves for themselves! This helps us understand why the nation was so brutal! Having deified brute force, they regarded themselves as being incapable of doing wrong with that force.

So yes, God was raising up an evil and wicked people to discipline Judah, NOT because the Lord delights in sin, BUT because His people did! Yet, this evil and wicked tool would not go unpunished. God says it here, "They will be held guilty!" (v. 11)

Now it is obvious that Habakkuk wasn't listening at this moment! He is angry at God and so isn't interested in the truth, just vindication!

Habakkuk's Second Accusation: A Morally Compromising God

Habakkuk 1:12-13: "Art Thou not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. Thou, O Lord, hast appointed them to judge; and Thou, O Rock, hast established them to correct. *Thine* eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness *with* favor. Why dost Thou look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?"

Look closely at this response, it is as contradictory as it is manipulative! First Habakkuk complains to God because His people are so unrighteous. The Lord answered. Now the prophet pleads for the Lord NOT to act because his people are so righteous! Yet again that is what happens when your goal is NOT truth, BUT vindication! It should be obvious that Habakkuk's problem really wasn't God's inactivity; it is that God didn't do what Habakkuk wanted Him to do when he wanted it! Truly, "autonomy" wasn't a problem just of the Babylonians... it also was Habakkuk's!

Notice the issue here is the promise of Judah's complete demise! Habakkuk wanted his nation to be disciplined, but not wiped off the face of the earth as the Northern Kingdom was in 722. In fact, in light of the many promises of God that said a ruler would always sit on the throne of David (cf. Micah 5:2), it was believed that the nation could never be toppled, and hence the assumption, "We shall not die!" Yet we have seen that when God established the nation of Israel, it was founded upon conditional promises. If the nation proved faithful, it would endure; if it rebelled, it would be wiped of the face of the earth (Leviticus 26:14-43; Deuteronomy 28:15).

Well, did the nation prove faithful? In no way! Accordingly, God wiped it off the face of the earth! Why, then, did God raise up the nation only to destroy a couple of centuries later? The Nation of Israel was a type/shadow of the nation which God was going to establish in His Son (Colossians 2:16-17). Jesus Christ would be the heir of the throne of David; accordingly in Christ there will always be a King seated on the throne of Davidic!

Habakkuk, and for that matter his entire generation, missed this (as do so many today)! Accordingly, as a good Calvinist, he endeavored to manipulate the Lord in the attempt to sway His will. *Aren't you eternal? Then your promises to Israel must also be eternal* (In other words there

can be no conditionality)! *Aren't you holy? Then Your eyes are too pure to use evil beings* (forget that as sinners, all of us are evil!)!² With these false assumptions, Habakkuk lays out an entire case in the attempt to force God's hand.

Habakkuk 1:14-15, "*Why hast Thou made men like the fish of the sea, like creeping things without a ruler over them? The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook, drag them away with their net, and gather them together in their fishing net. Therefore, they rejoice and are glad.*"

Habakkuk here is being rather Socratic. By this I mean that he is asking questions of God in the attempt to force the Lord into a corner so that He must act. The first revolves around the pleasure that the Babylonians derive from their abuse.

1. One of the callings of an image bearer is to "rule over the fish of the sea" (Genesis 1:28). The rule referenced here is that of a kind, gracious overseeing which does not break a bruised reed!
2. Now as God has made men like the fish of the sea, shouldn't His vessels care for these fish in a kind and gentle way? Yet the Babylonians not only are ruthless and rough, but they derive pleasure from their wicked treatment!

This was Habakkuk's case; God therefore must NOT stand idly by and allow Babylon to attack! Now if that weren't enough to get God to change His course of direction.

Habakkuk 1:16, "Therefore, they offer a sacrifice to their net. And burn incense to their fishing net; because through these things their catch is large, and their food is plentiful."

Wasn't it God who prohibited false worship and the worship of idols? Yet the Babylonians NOT only did not recognize the Lord, THEY worship the tools that God gave them to affect His will! O. Palmer Robertson observed this:

Perhaps Habakkuk by this vivid imagery intends to provoke the God of Israel to jealousy. How can he tolerate such perversity? The Chaldeans are clearly worshiping and serving the creature more than the Creator. Certainly God's wrath must be upon them. He had carefully taught his people to count the Lord himself as their portion above all other material possessions (cf. Numbers 18:20; Deuteronomy 10:9; Psalm 16:5; 73:26). But these barbarians make a god of sensual pleasure. (Robertson, 1990, p. 163)

Notice Habakkuk's final appeal:

Habakkuk 1:17, "Will they therefore empty their net and continually slay nations without sparing?"

In other words, God, are you going to allow this wicked nation to sin with impunity? Again, because Habakkuk wasn't really listening to God when the Lord first answered, the prophet

missed God's promise in v. 11 that "...they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god." Accordingly, this is Habakkuk's final, climatic question, *"Lord, you gonna let these sinners go without punishment? Get 'em now! Don't wait till they hurt Judah!"*

It took Abraham many years to be weaned from expecting too sudden a solution to the tension of the bareness of his wife and God's continued promises. His experience forced him by faith to look beyond the current experience of his day to the distant future. Now Habakkuk struggles with an identical struggle. How can God fulfill his promises to His people when He is about to devastate them?

God's Response: Look Not With Your Eye, But Through the Eye of Faith

After Habakkuk's comment about his plan to wait for the Lord to reply, notice the Lord's response:

Habakkuk 2:2-3, "Then the Lord answered me and said, 'Record the vision and inscribe *it* on tablets that the one who reads it may run. For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal, and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay.'"

All of Habakkuk's manipulation was for not. God would NOT be dissuaded from His eternal purpose! But once again Habakkuk needed to "look" and "see"! He needed to open his eyes and view life NOT from his perspective, BUT the Lord's!

Habakkuk 2:4, "Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith."

While there is no question that God gave a glorious promise of salvation, "He who is righteous by faith shall live!" (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11) nevertheless the immediate context is ethical. As Hebrew 10:38 quotes this passage, it has in mind the call to forsake the limited perspective of our humanness and finite apprehensions, and stubbornly to hold on to the truth of God's word as that which interprets/frames reality! This clearly was a watershed moment for Habakkuk! For right after this, the Lord's second response, Habakkuk's struggle dissipated, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines..." (Habakkuk 3:16-19)! Truly, as he stubbornly held on to the goodness of God and the description of the world as outlined in God's word, all things become clear! Specifically this:

- This world/age is NOT the final state!
- At the end of all things, every man, woman, and child will stand before the judgment seat of Christ!
- On that day, not the slightest sin will be overlooked!
- The burdens of this life are but momentary and light in comparison to the glory that awaits us in eternity!

You say, "Where do you get all of this?" We get it from the rest of the revelation given to Habakkuk at this time. Habakkuk 2:6-20 gives five characteristics of God's disposition toward the Babylonians and it is all bad!

1. God is Against Any and All who Acquire Dishonest Gain, vv. 6-8.

This is the first of the five "woes" in this revelation:

Habakkuk 2:6b, "Woe to him who increases what is not his- for how long [can this go on]- and makes himself rich with loans? Will not your creditors [lit., those who bite, who take a chunk out of the flesh. This isn't all loans, but certainly the ones made here] rise up suddenly, and those who collect from you awaken? Indeed, you will become plunder for them."

Family of God, today the wicked and proud live it up on the backs of the weak and poor; and God notices every injustice! So it won't always be as it is today. This we must see! Notice the second "woe".

2. God is Against Any and Every Nation which Exploit the Weak, vv. 9-11.

The "woe" pronounced is similar that in vv. 6-8. Yet in this context it is on a national scale:

Habakkuk 2:9-11, "Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house [~his dynasty; this is speaking directly about the Babylonians] to put his nest on high to be delivered from the hand of calamity! You have devised a shameful thing for your house by cutting off many peoples; so you are sinning against yourself. Surely the stone will cry out from the wall, and the rafter will answer it from the framework."

According to one of his own inscriptions Nebuchadrezzar said that one of the chief purposes for his strengthening the walls of Babylon was to make an everlasting name for his reign! This passage says that those very walls will cry out against him on the Day of Judgment!

3. God is Against Any and All who use Violence to Advance Their "Cause," vv. 12-14.

Habakkuk 2:12, "Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and founds a town with violence!"

From here Habakkuk then quotes various Biblical sayings found in Jeremiah 51:51, Numbers 14:21, and Isaiah 11:9- all of which speak of God's sovereignty over the nations and His ultimate vindication on the last day! The point? Woe, which is the strongest way to pronounce divine judgment/condemnation, rests upon any and all who in their sinfulness resort to violence to accomplish their personal agenda. Take heed members of Islam!

4. God is Against Any and All who would Lead others into Sin, vv. 15-17.

Habakkuk 2:15, "Woe to you who make your neighbors drink, who mix in your venom even to make *them* drunk so as to look on their nakedness!"

The idea here is that of encouraging others to engage in sin. With this we think of...

Romans 1:32, "And, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them."

Misery loves company, and so do sinners! It is not enough that a man must have his sin; to legitimize it, they will encourage others to do the same. The Babylonians did this on a large scale. Now note: God therefore condemned them and will condemn them on a much larger scale!

5. God is Against Any and all who Resort to an Idol for Help, vv. 18-20.

Habakkuk 2:18-19a, "What profit is the idol when its maker has carved it, *or* an image, a teacher of falsehood? For *its* maker trusts in his *own* handiwork when he fashions speechless idols. Woe to him who says to a *piece of wood*, 'Awake!' to a dumb stone, 'Arise!'"

In the words of Tozer, let us NOT think that Idolatry is housed simply in the bowing down before an icon or image. Idolatry is a sin of the heart which either (1) thinks of God in a way that is beneath His dignity, (2) ascribes to God false notions or attributes, or (3) grants honor or glory to something other than God! Accordingly, the idolatry referenced here is but the tip of a much larger iceberg, an iceberg which will rise up on the last day and call for Babylon's judgment! So God indeed was offended by the idolatry of Babylon!

The climax of Habakkuk's treatment is found in Habakkuk 2:20:

Habakkuk 2:20, "But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him."

As much as the nations might rage and threaten the child of God, nothing of any importance as it relates to the Christian can be touched! So a nation might topple as well as a church building, but our souls, our future, and our well-being are hidden with God in Christ! So...

- What is the nation of Judah?
- What is our money?
- What is our health?
- What is our future?

These are nothing more than vehicles/platforms for service in Christ and therefore expendable!

So in response to Habakkuk's objection, God tells the prophet to utilize the eye of faith and behold reality as it really is! The Babylonians are as nothing before Him and God's people can lose nothing of any real substance! For the Lord sits in session in His temple with the earth as His

footstool (Isaiah 66:1)!

If we only could live in light of this, we would be able to say with Habakkuk in the midst of the trial, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, and there be no fruit on the vines, *though* the yield of the olive should fail, and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' *feet*, and makes me walk on my high places." (Habakkuk 3:17-19a)

Bibliography

Robertson, O. P. (1990). *The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah (New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company.

End Notes

¹ Job likewise contended. But once God responded to the patriarch, all accusations were retracted! Such was not the case with Habakkuk. Habakkuk here levels an accusation against God to which the Lord responded. Yet Habakkuk was not satisfied with the answer. So the prophet leveled another accusation planning even for a third accusation!!!

² To be fair, Habakkuk has hit on a most fundamental question as it relates to evil (yet in his arrogance and argumentative spirit, he was unable to see the answer). God will not look on perverseness (v. 13a); yet he makes his prophet look on perverseness (v. 3). The Lord had declared it wrong for a witness to keep silence when a matter was brought before the public (Lev. 5:1); yet the Lord himself remains silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they (Habakkuk 1:13b).

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About the Preacher

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