

# Grappling With God...

## And growing in faith

**You're probably thinking it was about time to preach on Habakkuk again. Grant Thorp gives us the outlines for a great series on this often neglected prophet.**

My friend and I sat in front of the fire, a warm cup of coffee in our hands and raisin toast dripping with butter on the coffee table. We were having an enjoyable conversation catching up on old times; talking about ministry; and then he asked me the question. "What lessons have you learnt over the last five years of ministry?" I leant back in my chair and thought for a moment. My first thought was "that's a hard question to answer." But then I realised it wasn't hard to answer at all. I gave him a long list of things I'd learnt but there was no question what was first on the list. I said "It took me three months to realise that for one reason or another, practically everyone in the congregation has a broken heart."

Let me explain. Within the first eighteen months I was in Wee Waa, three families lost teenage kids in accidents. A mother was raising four little kids on her own because her husband had died of cancer. Other families had lost children in the past, were going through marriage difficulties, carried the scars of a reckless youth, had families who didn't love or support them. Within a very short space of time I was painfully aware that as I got up to preach I was facing a group of people who carried lots of scars and who were asking lots of questions. Questions like: Where is God? Is He fair? Can I trust Him to do right by me?

It's not until recently that I discovered a book that dealt directly with those very questions Habakkuk.

### THE SETTING

Practically nothing is known about Habakkuk. That's not so unusual with minor prophets. Often all we're told about them is their home town and the name of their father, but not even this detail is given for Habakkuk. We do know roughly when he wrote though. From Hab 1:6 it appears that the Babylonians were about to pounce on Israel at any moment, which means Habakkuk wrote sometime in the period between the rise of the Babylonian Empire (625BC), and their attack on Jerusalem which began around 592BC. During most of this period Assyria was the playground bully, but the kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon were closely related. Assyria was ruled over by Asshurbaanapal, and his older brother Shamash-shum-ukin was deputy king in Babylon. Shamash probably didn't like his younger brother having all the power and so he led a rebellion in 652, but it was put down. When Asshurbaanapal died his son Sin-shar-ishkun took over. It wasn't a smooth transition

though, because another brother also wanted control. Upheaval resulted and in the middle of it Nabopolassar, a Chaldean prince (626-605), again made a bid for independence on Babylon's behalf. In 626 Nabopolassar defeated the Assyrians outside Babylon and then took the throne.

These events as well as the defeat of Egypt in the Battle of Carchemish made it clear that Babylon was the new kid on the block. It's against this backdrop that Habbakkuk writes.

## STRUCTURE AND MESSAGE

Habakkuk is a fairly straightforward book. It consists of two complaints put to Yahweh by the prophet followed by two answers given by Yahweh to the prophet. It finishes with a prayer in chapter three.

Habakkuk 1:2-4

*Complaint One - 'Where are You Lord? Why do you make me look at injustice?'*

Habakkuk 1:5-11

*God's Answer - 'I'm going to raise up the Babylonians.'*

Habakkuk 1:12-2:1

*Complaint Two - 'Is it just to do that? Your eyes are too pure to look on evil.'*

Habakkuk 2:2-20

*God's Answer - 'I am just.'*

Habakkuk 3

*Habakkuk's Prayer - A focus on the faithfulness of God.*

Habakkuk begins as a frustrated prophet. He's surrounded by violence, injustice, strife and evil. Israel is going to pot and it seems God is just sitting on the sidelines watching it happen. He doesn't seem to care. In his frustration Habakkuk cries out "How long O Lord, must I call out for help, but you do not listen." (Habakkuk 1:2). Finally God answers, but it wasn't the answer Habakkuk was looking for. God informs him that he's going to raise up the Babylonians to punish Israel for her sin. This gives rise to Habakkuk's second complaint. "How could you God? How could you raise up a nation like Babylon to destroy a nation more righteous than them. It's not fair, it's not the sort of thing a holy God's supposed to do." Again God's answer to Habakkuk is to calm his fears. He assures him that what he's going to do will be just. Israel will be punished for her sin, but so will the Babylonians.

The book ends with Habakkuk's prayer focusing on God's faithfulness. He thinks back on God's awesome deeds of the past: the coming of Yahweh to their rescue in Egypt and at Sinai (v3-7), and his defeat of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (v15). He is reminded that God has always been faithful to his people and will continue to be faithful in the present crisis. This confidence gives rise to one of the most moving expressions of faith and trust in the whole bible. (Habakkuk 3:17,13).

## PREACHING ON HABAKKUK

Habakkuk's a man grappling with what God is like in the face of his life experiences. When

I preached on the book I tried to do two things. Firstly, I attempted to bring out the tension that our experience often places on our theology; and second, I tried to resolve those tensions by focusing on the character of God. This proved to be a helpful approach because we struggle with the same tensions and ask the same questions as Habakkuk. And the answer to all such tensions is to expand our view of God. I think that's why I enjoyed preaching on the book so much. It forced me to think about the character of God in a way I hadn't done for a long time. In the end I found myself being excited by the greatness and grace of God. At that point the answers to the questions didn't seem to be so pressing.

## RECOMMENDED READING

I used two main works to help me with the text of the book - the Tyndale commentary on *"Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah"* by David W Baker, and *The Faith of Israel* ~ by Bill Dumbrell. Baker's commentary was helpful, though weak on drawing connections to the New Testament. I also disagreed with his emphasis on chapter 3. He saw it as referring to God's impending judgement on the Babylonians. I think it's clear however, that chapter 3 is looking back to God's great deeds in the past and asking him to renew them in the present crisis, a point Dumbrell brings out. In conjunction with the series I also read Philip Yancey's book *"Disappointment with God."* Yancey deals with the same questions and tensions that Habakkuk deals with and I think it was the most helpful reading I did. Even if you don't preach on Habakkuk read Yancey's book. It's a real beauty.

## Sermon 1

### The God of Surprises - Habakkuk 1:1-11

#### 1. The Problem

The question "where is God?" assaults modern day believers. Is he in Rwanda? Why the bloodshed? Is he in Ethiopia? Why the starvation? Is he with us? Why then is life so difficult? This is the question Habakkuk is struggling with. He is surrounded by violence and perverted justice, and in his frustration cries out for help - but God doesn't seem to care.

#### 2. God's Answer

God finally answers Habakkuk and assures him that despite appearances he is working. Habakkuk, however, may not like what he is doing. He is going to raise up the Babylonians, to punish Israel for her sin. Habakkuk is aghast. How can God raise up a wicked nation like Babylon to punish a nation more righteous than itself? It's like Hitler being the presiding judge against Pol Pot.

#### 3. What God is Like

The bible is a theology book - it teaches us about God. What do we learn about him here? God's Ways are Surprising. God's Ways are Inscrutable

#### 4. How Does This Help

Where is God? In the middle of the field directing play. We think that because God doesn't do what we expect him to do he's not doing anything. We think that because we can't see the sense in what he's doing that he hasn't got his finger on the pulse. Both conclusions are wrong. God's ways are surprising. They are inscrutable. But he knows what he's doing and he says trust me.

## Sermon 2

### The God of Justice - Habakkuk 1:12.2:20

#### **1. A Desire for Justice**

My Dad was very fair. He rarely smacked us but when I ran my sister's baby stroller through the back veranda he got stirred up and I copped it. That was just, though. I deserved it. But on another occasion my sister framed me and I got punished for something I didn't do. It's unfortunate I remember that incident because it wasn't typical but the reason I do remember it is because of the great desire for justice we all feel and the sense of outrage we have if it isn't done. Habakkuk is full of outrage because it appears to him that justice isn't being done by God in raising up Babylon to punish Israel. He can't reconcile that with the holiness and justice of God. Habakkuk's big question is "Is God Just?" Can I count on him to do the right thing?"

#### **2. Seeing God's Justice**

i. *To See God's Justice Requires God's Perspective.* Habakkuk could only see a wicked nation overpowering one more righteous than itself. But God says Babylon will be punished also v6-8.

ii. *To See God's Justice Requires Patience.* Habakkuk wanted to see justice done straight away. So do we. Habakkuk's cry "How Long, O Lord" (1:2) is also our cry. God's answer is "be patient - justice will come" (Habakkuk 2:2-3).

#### **3. The Revelation of God's Justice**

##### *i. In History*

God shows that he is just by relaying the basic principle of justice that he works by - the punishment should fit the crime. So the one who plunders will be plundered (v6-8); the one who builds a realm through injustice will find the walls cry out against him (v9-11). By this principle both Israel and Babylon are judged.

##### *ii. At the Cross*

The place we see God's justice most clearly though is at the cross. Romans 3 leads us to that conclusion. Whenever we are tempted to think that God is unjust, or that we are being unfairly treated, we need to revisit the cross and note how committed to justice God is.

## Sermon 3

### The Struggle for Faith - Habakkuk 3

#### **L The Struggle for Faith**

We often have a hidden agenda in our relationship with the Lord. We say if God is God then...I won't be struck by a lingering illness, I won't bury any of my children, it will rain so I can plant a crop." When things don't go according to our agenda our faith is rocked. But what does real faith look like? Habakkuk 3:17,18 shows us.

#### **2. Real Faith**

##### *i. The Character of Real Faith. Let's God be God*

The person with real faith doesn't say "If God is God then..." They say "God is God and so I'll trust him." We see this attitude in other places notably in Job and in the account of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.

*ii. The Path to Real Faith - Testing*

It's no surprise that Habakkuk's confession of faith comes at the end of a period of struggle. Faith puts on muscle through testing. See this in Heb 11:32fL

*iii. The Basis of Faith - The Faithfulness of God*

The Basis of Faith is the faithfulness of God. In chapter 3, Habakkuk recalls the great deeds of God in the past (v3-7 God's coming in the Exodus and at Mt Sinai; v5-15 The destruction of the Egyptian Army) and asks him to renew those deeds in the present crisis. In his difficulty Habakkuk looked back at the faithfulness of God. We are to do the same. When we do we see an even more impressive sign of his faithfulness-the cross.

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