

“The Forward Look of Faith”

Habakkuk 2:1-20

The nation of Judah was on the brink of disaster. Spiritual apathy and idolatry had spread like a plague throughout the land. From the temple to the palace, corruption and compromise was proudly on display. Violence and social decay were the norms for the day. Gathering storm clouds were looming on the national horizon, and no one seemed to be concerned about repentance. All was not well with the southern kingdom, and the prophet Habakkuk knew that something had to be done.

As chapter 1 begins, Habakkuk expresses his concerns and pours out his complaint to God. He had been greatly burdened by what he witnessed in Judah. The Lord shows him that He would most certainly deal with the sin of His people, but Habakkuk wouldn't like the way God would do it. The Lord answers his prayer, but he won't really like the answer. He tells Habakkuk, “If you think you are uncomfortable now, you've not seen anything yet. I'm about to do a work that you would not believe if I told you.” God says that He was raising up the Chaldeans, and they are going to sweep across the world and carry the people of Judah away into captivity. His chastening of His people involved raising up a nation even more wicked than they had been. And the Chaldeans would be an instrument of judgment in God's hands. God says in 1:6, “I am raising them up.” So things were bad, but they were about to get worse.

Habakkuk then finds himself wrestling with God's sovereign purposes. That's what his name means—to wrestle or to embrace. That's what we find him doing in the three little chapters of this book that bears his name. We find him on his face wrestling with God in chapter 1. God reveals His plans to the prophet in

chapter 2 and reminds him of His promise. And in chapter 3, Habakkuk embraces God with surrendered faith and humble worship. The key verse is:

2:4—“The righteous shall live by his faith.”

- Faith that is tested
- Faith that is taught
- Faith that is triumphant

I want to pick up here in chapter 2 where we last left off as the prophet has said, “I will take my stand at my watch post and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what He will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.” In other words, he says, “I’m going to get alone with God and assume a posture of faith.” And he is going to back away from the problems he’s been worried over and will leave them in the hands of God. He determines to trust God’s Word on the matter rather than his reasoning.

That is what faith does. Faith is responding to God’s Word, submitting to what God initiates. It isn’t a blind leap into the dark. It isn’t believing in spite of a lack of evidence. No, faith is confidence in God that shows up in a willingness to listen and a readiness to obey. It is obeying God no matter the consequences; it is acting upon God’s truth as He has revealed it in His Word. Faith is no better than its object. Faith is the conviction that something is actually so in spite of evidence that sometimes screams to the contrary. It is the assurance that something is true even when it cannot be physically perceived.

Manley Beasley — *“Faith is acting as if something is so, when it seems not to be so, in order for it to be so, because God said it is so.”*

(illus. of water pump in the desert)

Habakkuk doesn't know the details of the future, but he is going to trust God. He places his faith in God's Word and in God's holy character. He will trust the Lord to do what is right, to work out His purposes while keeping His promises. And what we find here in chapter 2 is what I'm calling the 'forward look' of faith. Notice it involves a few things:

1—The PRIORITY of God's Word (2:1-4)

“And the Lord answered me: ‘Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay.’”

God says to him, “Write the vision.” The ‘vision’ being referred to here is that of the coming Babylonian invasion and how it will serve the purpose of God to correct His wayward people. And that is a very important word.

“Vision” —*translates a Hebrew noun meaning a revelation by means of a vision; a divine communication; the primary essence of this word is not so much the vision itself as the message conveyed; direct communication between God and His people through the prophetic office*

It means the answer that he was given was not the result of his insight, nor was it the result of his intellect. The answer that God gave Habakkuk came by way of revelation. God gives him His Word on the matter, and the prophet was to write it down and make it plain so it could be understood and circulated. So the vision that Habakkuk is given by the Lord involved God speaking, the prophet writing, and others reading.

It began with God ‘speaking’ to Habakkuk. He revealed to Habakkuk His Word for His people. In fact, that is how you and I have a copy of God's Word in our

possession now. It means that God's Word is inspired, literally breathed out by God (2 Timothy 3:16). In 2 Peter 1:20, the Bible says that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but men of God spoke as they were moved by the Spirit of God. By means of His Spirit, God revealed His Word to the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament.

Then, notice that the Lord tells Habakuk to 'write the vision and make it plain.' God speaks, and the prophet writes down what is spoken. It was important that it be written down so that it be preserved. You and I would not be studying this book today had the prophet not obeyed God's instructions to write down what God had shown him.

The Lord says, "Write the vision, make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it." God speaks, and Habakkuk is to write down what is spoken. This writing would be permanent so that each passing generation could read what had been revealed. And it was to be made plain on tablets, written in a way that anyone could read it. In other words, the Lord says, "Habakkuk, I am going to give you My Word. I want you to write it down, and I want you to write it so plainly that anyone who reads it will be able to immediately understand it and spread it all throughout the land." This shows us how the forward look of faith involves trusting God's Word over our own faulty reasoning.

Proverbs 3:5-7—“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.”

In other words, don't rely on your own insight. Don't rely on your own intellect. Many of our failures to understand life in the world around us comes as the result of seeking an answer through our own human intellect. The reason is our pride. We rely on our faulty reasoning rather than faith in the revelation that comes from God. He has revealed Himself to us in many ways, and we need Him to open our eyes that we might see.

Habakkuk is in a position of humility and trust, and God opens his eyes and gives him a revelation of what He is about to do. Habakkuk needed the forward look of faith.

Psalm 46:10—“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”

The prophet Elijah had to learn this lesson. After the show down with the prophets of Baal on the top of Mt. Carmel, he was sure that revival was about to come to Israel. He's on the mountain of victory in 1 Kings 18, but finds himself in the valley of despair in chapter 19. God will take him all the way back to a cave on Mt. Horeb and speak to him in a still small voice—“The world is not over, I'm on My throne, and I have work for you to do.”

The forward look of faith means I trust in God to always do what is right even when I don't understand it. The just shall live by his faith. I'm to trust Him in the dark.

Isaiah 50:10—“Who among you fears the Lord? Who obeys the voice of His Servant? Who walks in darkness and has no light? Let him trust in the name of the Lord and rely upon his God.”

V. Raymond Edman — *“Never doubt in the dark what God has revealed to you in the light.”*

Habakkuk received a word from the Lord who gave him the vision that he needed to bring him from a place of wrestling with God to embracing God in faith.

2—The PRONOUNCEMENT of God’s judgment (2:5-20)

“Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples. Shall not all these take up their taunt against him, with scoffing and riddles for him, and say, ‘Woe to him...’”

Earlier in chapter 1:13, Habakkuk had said to the Lord:

“You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do You idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?”

It was his way of acknowledging God’s holy hatred of sin and the reality of His judgment against it. How could God use wicked Babylon to judge Judah? They had been far worse. Would God let them get away with their evil? Well, notice how in verse 4 the Lord distinguishes between two different types of people. On one hand, there is the proud who is ‘puffed up,’ one who is not upright in his soul. On the other hand, there is the righteous who lives by his faith. The pride of man is seen in contrast with the way of faith.

The Babylonians had been proud and drunk on their own power. But in verse 5, God begins to reveal how He will judge the pride of Babylon. It wouldn’t happen over night, but it would happen nonetheless. God would be their judge and would pour out His divine wrath upon their sin.

J.I. Packer — *“There are few things stressed more strongly in the Bible than the reality of God’s work as Judge. It is a word often applied to Him.”*

When Abraham interceded for Sodom, the city marked for destruction, he cried out to the Lord in Genesis 18:25, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

Psalm 75:3-8—**“When the earth totters, and all its inhabitants, it is I who keep steady its pillars...it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another. For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and He pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.”**

And the writer of Hebrews says that God is the Judge of all, and He is a consuming fire. He hates with holy and perfect hatred all that is opposed to His moral character. He hates sin and therefore must punish it in extension of His justice.

- He judged Adam and Eve, expelling them from the Garden and pronounced His curse on a fallen world
- He judged the wicked world of Noah’s day, sending a flood to wipe out his generation
- He judged the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, engulfing them in fire and brimstone
- He judged Pharaoh and the Egyptians in the form of ten separate plagues before leading His people out
- He judged the Israelites for their unfaithfulness to Him after they entered the Promised Land

- He judged the northern kingdom and used Sennacherib and the Assyrians
- He judged the southern kingdom by raising up the Babylonians just as He told Habakkuk he would do
- And the time would come that He would judge the pride of Babylon, for God is no respecter of persons

Verses 6-20 make up what scholars refer to as a ‘taunt song.’ A taunt song often began with the simple interjection ‘woe’ or ‘alas.’ We see something similar in Matthew 23 as Jesus denounced the pride and hypocrisy of the religious leaders, where He pronounced several ‘woes’ against the scribes and Pharisees. The ‘woe’ was a warning of coming judgment. And in the vision that He gives Habakkuk, God pronounces ‘woe’ upon five specific sins that characterized the Babylonians. For what exactly would He judge them?

Stolen increase (v. 6-8)

“Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own—for how long?—and loads himself with pledges! Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them. Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.”

They had plundered many nations, conquered lands, and God says He is going to judge Babylon for its greed. They had taken for themselves what was not their’s to take. By extortion, they had stockpiled for themselves wealth and material increase. And yet the time would come when God would visit their sinful greed on their own heads.

Blatant injustice (v. 9-11)

“Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm! You have devised shame for your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life. For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond.”

God pronounces woe against their false sense of security. The idea here is that they operated under this notion that because of their strength and military might, they were beyond the reach of harm. The ‘nest on high’ reminds me of something I read once about the Third Reich. High up in the mountains of southern Germany, Hitler had what he and his Nazi cronies referred to as the ‘Eagle’s Nest.’ It was a place they had built on top of a mountain, a place where they would hold meetings with dignitaries and plan their atrocities. God says, “Woe to the one who in pride builds for himself a false sense of security, thinking that he is beyond the reach of harm!”

Ambitious iniquity (v. 12-14)

“Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity! Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples merely labor for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing? For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

No matter what they acquired for themselves or heaped up for themselves by way of stolen wealth or wicked ambition, they merely labored for the fire. The nations of men weary themselves for nothing. God says that at the end of the day when the wind of His judgment has blown, all of their great endeavors will have amounted to nothing at all.

Wicked immorality (v. 15-17)

“Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink—you pour out your wrath and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness! You will have your fill of shame instead of glory. Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision! The cup in the Lord’s right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory! The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them, for the blood of man and violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.”

Notice the progression of moral decline. What begins with greed and covetousness leads to evil gain, then followed by iniquity and then immorality. Sounds a lot like Romans 1 as Paul describes God’s judgment on unrighteousness.

Romans 1:18—“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”

God’s wrath means there is never a time when God is not reacting to sin. So what does God do? Three times in Romans 1 do we find this phrase—“God gave them up.” It means He unleashes them to pursue the sinful dictates of their heart and reap the consequences of it. He removes His hand of restraint and gives them over to a reprobate, debased mind.

Religious idolatry (v. 18-20)

“What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For its maker trusts in his own creation when he makes speechless idols! Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, Awake; to a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it. But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him.”

God will pour out His judgment on the idolatrous religious system of Babylon. Idolatry is the worship of anything and everything else other than God, what a person turns to for strength and security rather than the Lord. And idolatry is not just one of many sins—it is the one sin that all the others come from. It is the enthronement of self.

Habakkuk was puzzled about the pride of the Babylonians and God says to him, “I’m going to deal with them in My own time.” Daniel 5 says that it would be more than fifty years later, as King Belshazzar was holding a drunken feast for a thousand of his lords, the fingers of a human hand appeared and began to write on the wall of his palace. It spelled out the message of judgment—Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin. The king called for Daniel, who then interprets it:

Daniel 5:26-28—“This is the interpretation of the matter: Mene, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end. Tekel, you have been weighed in the balances and found wanting. Peres, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.”

And that very night, Belshazzar of Babylon was killed and his kingdom went to Darius the Mede. The mills of God grind slow, but they grind fine.

3—The PROMISE of God’s kingdom and rule (2:14, 20)

“For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea...But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him.”

The world may crumble away around us. Society may be paying a steep price for its sin. All that we know and love may vanish. But God tells the prophet, “The righteous shall live by his faith.” The righteous lives his or her life with the

forward look of faith. Why? Because the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. The Lord is in His holy temple, and let all the earth keep silence before Him!

Psalm 2:6-8—“As for Me, I have set My King on Zion, My holy hill. I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to Me, You are My Son; today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will make the nations Your heritage, and the ends of the earth Your possession.”

Never in my life have I seen so many people living under the grip of fear as I have recently. And for those who have nothing to look forward to in eternity, I understand it. This life is all that they know. The rewards of this life is all that have. But it ought to be different for men and women who claim to have Jesus as their King. We don't have to cave in to fear and cultural pressure. We don't fear sickness, death, or hardship because Jesus Christ is alive!

The Scripture tells me that I have been delivered from the fear of death through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in my place. The world as we know it has always been a dangerous place. It has been that way since Genesis 3. In a broken world, you will get sick at some point. You will lose someone you love at some point. Your world will fall apart at some point. You can live your life paralyzed with fear, or you can live by the forward look of faith.

David Jeremiah—*“Christians should be the calmest people on earth. We have no right to run around this world in frenzied activity, staying up and walking the floor at night, wondering what is going to happen. God in heaven rules the kingdoms of men.”*

The Lord is in His holy temple! God has set His King on Zion's hill. Let all the earth keep silent before Him. Our problem is that we don't know how to be still

and know that He is God. We feel like we always have to say something, to have the last word. God gets the last word. He has said by way of promise that His Son will inherit the kingdoms of this world. One day, the final trumpet will sound:

Revelation 11:15—“The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!”

*And Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.*

This is what believers have to look forward to. Until then, the waters may rise. Society may crumble. Evil may grow worse. But the forward look of faith understands that Jesus Christ and His kingdom purposes will prevail. It recognizes that God’s judgment is swift when it comes, but His grace is available now to all who would turn to Christ in faith and repentance. God’s justice demands payment for sin, but in His mercy He provided a substitute to take our punishment for us.

Romans 5:8-9—“God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.”