



SUNDAY SCHOOL MINISTRY

Discipleship Plan

Year Seven
Habakkuk Lessons

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Lesson 1: The Posture for Prophetic Protest in Prayer (Habakkuk Part 1)

Primary Verses: "Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. 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? I will take my stand at my watchpost 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" (Habakkuk 1:12-13, 2:1 ESV)

Teaching Text: Habakkuk 1:1-2:1

Supporting Texts: Psalm 83, Psalm 142

Before delving into the content of God's revelation to Habakkuk, so we don't miss much, let's first engage in a brief discussion of the book's title. The name Habakkuk is a lesson in itself. Deriving from the Hebrew root "habaq," the name suggests one who will "ardently, fervently embrace." Given the complicated subject matter and the complaint-answer structure of the book, some scholars have suggested Habakkuk goes beyond embracing. Nicknamed "the wrestler" or "the grappler" in certain circles, Habakkuk's text provides more than prophetic information about Israel's future. It serves as a model of how believers may faithfully plead with God in prayer, while remaining determined to receive His divine help and guidance to understand the harsh realities of his, or even our, day.

This book is also unique in that there are no sermons to the people. While there is plenty of commentary about the state of God's covenant people in Judah, the book of Habakkuk challenges us in an inward journey of self-examination. Before ministering to others, Habakkuk had to see his own heart and invest time to discern whether his relationship with God was on solid ground. Before calling others to faithfulness, Habakkuk brought his faith in God under the bright lights of God's presence. What an admirable example for all believers to follow!

Questions to Consider: Is Habakkuk's concern long-standing or recent? How can we tell from the text we are studying? How would you describe the prophet's tone (1:2-4)? Considering his Audience, how do we account for the way Habakkuk addresses his Hearer? Is it appropriate to complain this way? Why or why not? Was it okay for Habakkuk to approach God in this way? How does God's answer to Habakkuk confirm if it was okay? Is the answer received (1:5-11) any apparent comfort at all? What is the analysis given about the Chaldeans (verses 5-11)? How does this analysis complicate Habakkuk's concerns? Does that analysis give any indirect comfort? How do the titles used by Habakkuk to address God (verses 12-13) mesh with the answer he received (verses 5-11) from his previous concerns?

Challenging the Class: How do you respond when God doesn't seem to see things your way? What is your resolve when you've poured out your heart to Him and His answer seems cold, uncaring, or even unjust? Habakkuk was determined to keep pressing, his confidence was in God's ability to answer, even if it required waiting. Are you "standing at the watchpost" for anything? Do you trust God to respond regardless of how long it takes? Do you trust His answer although it doesn't seem fair?

Lesson 2: Patience for Divine Proclamations and the Divine Path (Habakkuk Part 2)

Primary Verses: "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 the cities and all who dwell in them... Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity! Behold it is not from the LORD of hosts that peoples labor merely for fire and the 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." (Habakkuk 2:8, 12-14 ESV)

Teaching Text: Habakkuk 2:2-2:20

Supporting Texts: Psalm 88

Many of us have heard the verse, "*write the vision and make it plain.*" Often, the verse is used to encourage believers to capture big, bold, "God-sized" dreams and to use the exercise of writing as a declaration of faith in God for the start of a new or renewed vision for our lives. However well-intentioned, we can surmise from this passage this interpretation is not the original intent of the passage; it is not even connected with the thought.

Habakkuk is not commanded to write down his own hope or dream. Instead, he wrote down God's declaration concerning the complaint(s) he faithfully brought to God. Only a few persons have written divine words while being carried by the Holy Spirit – generally, Apostles and Prophets, on whom our faith is built. Not because of them, but because of the Holy Scriptures God gave us through them. Though God's Word may appear slow in fulfillment, we are commanded to maintain hope because God is trustworthy, and His Word will surely come to pass. The same, however, cannot be said concerning our plans.

To clarify, God sets before Habakkuk two ways (verse 4): 1) the man whose soul is "puffed up" or proud - God says such one is not upright; and 2) the way of faith - "just" or "righteous." Without much elaboration on the way of faith, almost the chapter 2 is mostly consumed with God's proclamation of woe (curses, "bad news") against the Chaldeans.

Questions to Consider: When God makes *particular* judgments, do they apply in *general* outside of that situation? In other words, is there a way to apply/understand the divine woes against Babylon for our modern day? How can we do this without violating the integrity of the scriptures? What are some healthy boundaries? What are the dangers of not abiding by helpful boundaries? How many oracles of woe do you find in God's answer to Habakkuk? Are there specific ways in which we see shadows or even the same conditions in our day? What should we expect from God if we see any or all of the same sins in our land or lives today? How should our answers to the previous questions inform our prayers now?

Challenging the Class: The words "upright" and "unjust" are opposites. But, in what sense is the path of faith the opposite of pride? Remember, Habakkuk's second complaint was against the apparent injustice of God's usage of a wicked nation to swallow up those who were more righteous than they (1:13). But God only explains what He will do to that nation afterward. Yet, He calls Habakkuk to the path of faith. It is one thing to trust God for an answer, but it is entirely another thing to trust God when His answer doesn't seem to line up with your question! Are you on the path of faith? Or do you demand God to make sense to you before you trust Him? Or do you trust God's character despite how things appear?

Lesson 3: Singing with Certainty *and* Shigionoth (Habakkuk Part 3)

Primary Verses: "You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret. You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters. (Habakkuk 3:12-15 ESV)

Teaching Text: Habakkuk 3

Supporting Texts: Psalm 7, 77-78

What is Shigionoth? According to the **Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible** and the **Dictionary of Old Testament Prophets:**

"While the precise meaning of *shigionoth* is uncertain, it is related to *shagah* ("to go astray" or "to stumble"), suggesting a lament or possibly a song with an uneven meter. If a linguistic connection can be made with *shegu* from the Akkadian language (a parent language to Hebrew), then its usage, in the form *shigu*, in prayer indicates a sense of emotion and supplication, perhaps accompanied by a whimpering sound. **This indicates that Habakkuk accepts the Lord's responses in a psalm of trust, struggling to express his deeply rooted faith in the Lord and ongoing need for God's guidance.**" (Emphasis added)

Habakkuk's case is a hard one. He is watching the almost certain destruction of his nation. Of course, this is not just any nation, but the Lord's own people. The domination of Judah by Babylon is virtually inescapable and his only comfort is that God will, at some undisclosed future time, judge the wicked nation even as He has determined to use the wicked nation as His means of judgment on Israel. Is it any wonder that the inspired song comes in the form of the *shigionoth*? The prophet loves God and has placed his every hope in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet, he struggles, recognizing he may not live to see God's act of deliverance. Therefore, like so many of us in our day, his trust is in God's character and track record.

Questions to Consider: What is the first thing Habakkuk can express thanks for? How many opportunities for gratitude and worship are found in verse 2? Is it a contradiction to ask God, in His wrath, to remember mercy? When did God's glory cover the heavens, and when did He "measure the earth?" How might this imagery help bring reassurance to Habakkuk at a time of near national collapse? What kind of imagery is being used to describe God (verses 8-11)? The prophet's song is about God, but what is the role ascribed to Him in these verses? Can you think of a time when God "went out for the salvation of [His] people..." or trampled the sea with [His] horses, the surging of many waters?" Why might such depictions bring any solace to Habakkuk?

Challenging the Class: Habakkuk's song ends with an iron-clad resolve to venture forth in faith that yields joy. Consider how important figs, grapes, olives, and livestock were in the land; they represented a sizable, if not the majority, of what passed for the most valuable trade commodities in Judah/Israel. Habakkuk declares that even in a complete economic implosion, he can rejoice in the Lord! The change Habakkuk needs is not in the economy, but in his feet (vs. 19). He needs God to make him prepared to live in tough terrain. Are you only praying for circumstantial change? Or do your prayers for improvement center on a hope that God transforms *you* and perfects your *faith* for the days ahead?

Lesson 4: Habakkuk's Echo and the Legacy of Faith (Habakkuk Part 4)

Primary Verses: "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeting them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth... they were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. All these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised (Hebrews 11:13, 37-39 ESV)

Teaching Text: Hebrews 10:32-11:40

Supporting Texts: Romans 1:16-17, Galatians 3:1-14

Hebrews 11 is referred to as "The Faith Hall of Fame." There are many chapters in the Bible which contain lists of God's amazing acts of redemption and judgment. Of course, there are genealogies that contain lists of many heroes, heroines, and villains found in the Holy Scripture. But there is hardly another chapter, like Hebrews 11, whose theme, "by faith," is so strongly and clearly pushing us onward and upward to the heavenly city, while reminding us of those who came before. But what is generally ignored, unknown, and/or forgotten about this great passage is that it essentially owes its fame to the relatively obscure prophet whose inspired writings we've been studying.

Because it was apparently written to believers who were tempted to "shrink back" or possibly return to temple worship as they knew it before Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, the book of Hebrews is filled with Old Testament imagery and themes. The author spares no stones and turns over every rock from Moses to Malachi, seeking to encourage his audience that Jesus is not only sufficient for their salvation, but also has a better name than angels, is a more respected in God's house as a Son than Moses, who was a servant, offers a better rest than Joshua, and is a better priest than any High Priest who ever served. Jesus, then, is worth whatever "dangers, toils, and snares" they are facing. He encourages them to move on "by faith." And when the author, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is seeking scriptural support to push his readers to journey forward "by faith," he can do no better than to echo the words of Habakkuk, "my righteous one shall live by faith." See the words of Huldrych Zwingli, the father of the Swiss Reformation:

"After engaging in lengthy discussion of the priesthood of Christ, in which he demonstrated that He is the complete and finished sacrifice, now he shows how we may become partakers of the merit and offering of Christ by the covenant or mediator. He does this by means of the oracle of the prophet Habakkuk, in which he declares that the righteous shall live by faith..." –Reformation Commentary on Scripture, pg. 151

Questions to Consider: How does Hebrews 10:36, though written in a New Testament context, necessarily lead to a deep study of Old Testament saints? What is the role of faith in preparing and equipping one for patient perseverance? Have you noticed many of the persons detailed in Hebrews 11 are "on the move?" How do their travels inform a theme for both them and us? How does Hebrews 11:40 bring unity between the faithful from both the Old and New Covenant?

Challenging the Class: Our faith is both private and public. Our personal walk of faith with God (or lack thereof) inevitably goes public. The echo of the faithful (Hebrews 11) continues to inspire and inform us today. Are you living for God in such a way that your love for Christ clearly echoes for generations to come?

What Dead Abel Speaks to Us

Article by
Jon Bloom

The story of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 tells much more about Cain than Abel. In fact, not one word is recorded from living Abel. But the author of Hebrews says that, "through [Abel's] faith, though he died, he still speaks" (Hebrews 11:4). So what is dead Abel speaking to us?

It was dusk. Cain was working late. Not wanting to face his parents, he was trying to disguise his guilt-infused fear with a preoccupation with his crops. Then suddenly the unmistakable voice of the LORD sent a shock through his core: "Where is Abel, your brother?"

Cain had grown to loathe Abel. It had been building for years. No matter what, Abel always seemed to turn a situation to his advantage. Was there a conflict? Abel the Humble loved to be the first to reconcile. Did anyone need help? Abel the Servant loved to be the first to offer it. Was there an injury? Abel the Compassionate loved to be the first to comfort. Even when Cain showed greater endurance and ingenuity in his work, Abel could rob him of any satisfaction with a virtuoso performance of self-effacing virtue.

What Cain found most maddening was Abel the Pious, flaunting his tender conscience and precious devotion to God for the admiration of all. Cain could barely stomach how father and mother gushed over that.

With every perceived humiliation, Cain caressed the secret suspicion that Abel only used goodness to show himself superior to Cain.

But that morning Cain had suffered a crushing blow. The LORD had required each brother to present an offering, the first fruits of their labors. Cain saw in this an opportunity. This time Abel would not upstage him. Cain would prove that he too could excel in devotion. So he made sure that his offering lavishly exceeded the required amount of his best produce.

But when the LORD reviewed Cain's extravagant offering, he rejected it. Cain was stunned. Then, injury to insult, the LORD accepted Abel's comparatively simple lamb offering. Humiliated by Abel again! But this time before God!

Cain was beside himself. Hatred metastasized into horror. Abel had outshined him for the last time. By late afternoon Abel's lifeless body lay in a remote field, abandoned in the hope that a beast's hunger would conceal the fratricide.

But the LORD's question left Cain naked and exposed (Hebrews 4:13). He lied with the anger of cornered guilt: "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" What it was, in fact, that he did not know was that his silenced brother had not been quiet. The LORD replied, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:9-10).

Yes, the blood of dead Abel cried out to God for justice (Genesis 4:10; Hebrews 12:24). But the faith of dead Abel "still speaks" (Hebrews 11:4). So what is he saying to us through his faith?

"Without faith it is impossible to please God"

One thing we hear is that *God only accepts faith-fueled offerings*. It's significant that God doesn't provide details about either Cain's or Abel's offerings, the first ever recorded in the Bible. In the story, I imagined Cain trying to win God's approval with an impressive looking offering. But it could just have easily been a stingy offering or an exactly precise offering. The point is that right from the beginning God draws our attention away from what fallen humans think is important, namely how our works can make us look impressive, to what God thinks is important, namely how our works reveal who we trust.

All of Scripture teaches us that "the righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4) because "without faith it is impossible to please" God (Hebrews 11:6). Abel was "commended as righteous" by God because he presented his offering in faith (Hebrews 11:4). Cain's offering was "evil" (1 John 3:12) because without humble trust in God, even our offerings (hear: any work we do for God) are evil to God — no matter if they appear to everyone else as obedient or impressive.

"You will be hated by all for my name's sake"

A second thing we hear from Abel is that *the world will hate you if you live by faith in Jesus* (who the New Testament reveals is YHWH, the LORD in Philippians 2:11). The Apostle John makes this clear: "We should not be like Cain, who was of the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous. Do not be surprised, brothers, that the world hates you" (1 John 3:12–13). Abel was the first to discover that "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). To "let [our] light shine before others, so that they may see [our] good works" (Matthew 5:16) will at times expose others' wickedness and arouse their hatred (John 3:20). Jesus himself said, "you will be hated by all for my name's sake," "some of you they will put to death" — some even at the hands of "parents and brothers and relatives and friends (Luke 21:16–17). Righteous faith arouses evil hatred.

A better word than Abel's blood

In the story, though we'd rather see ourselves as Abel, we are all Cain. We were at one time cursed, "hostile to God" and alienated from him (Romans 8:7; Ephesians 4:18). Abel, the first martyr of faith, is a foreshadowing of our Lord Jesus, whose "blood... speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (Hebrews 12:24). For though Abel's innocent blood cried out for justice against sin, Jesus's innocent blood cried out for mercy for sinners. Abel's blood exposed Cain in his wretchedness. Jesus's blood covers our wretchedness and cleanses us from all sin (Romans 7:24; 1 John 1:9).

So now as we seek to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God, let us remember that the only thing that makes this acceptable to God, the only thing that makes it a spiritual service of worship, is our childlike faith in Jesus (Romans 12:1; 3:26). And let us soberly remember that the only reward this is likely to earn us from the world is its hatred.

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The Reproach of Christ

"He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward" (Heb. 11:26).

There are few figures more associated with the old covenant than Moses, the one chosen by God to lead His people out of slavery in Egypt. The old covenant was so closely associated with Moses that in New Testament times one could ask, "What did Moses write?" in place of "What does the Law say?" (see Mark 10:3).

Because Moses is so pivotal for the old covenant, it is no wonder that the author of the epistle to the Hebrews explains how he is a model of persevering faith. Remember that the original audience of this epistle wanted to return to the old covenant. They wanted to return to the ceremonial observances of the Law because they were suffering persecution and disgrace for bearing the name of Christ. They thought they could be faithful to the example of Moses if they went back to the Law and followed it exactly as it was given.

The original audience wanted to turn away from the reproach of Christ. They wanted to turn away and leave the disgrace that He brought them by returning to the old covenant system. However, to do so would not evidence the same faithfulness as their hero, Moses, did. Hebrews 11:26 tells us that rather than turning away from the reproach of Christ, Moses embraced it. In fact, he considered this reproach to be "greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt."

Verse 25 tells us how Moses embraced this reproach. Moses shunned the court of Pharaoh and identified with the suffering of his people who themselves were disgraced by suffering under slavery in Egypt. By leaving his position of prestige for scorn he imitated Jesus who left the privileges of glory and identified Himself with the suffering of His people under the bondage of pagan governments. Moreover, Jesus also bore the disgrace of being rejected by His people and by the world when He died on the cross for those who hated Him.

In some small way, Moses shared in these disgraces when he left the house of Pharaoh to intercede for Israel. Moses could do this because he was looking forward to his reward (v. 26). He knew that this disgrace would be only temporary but that the reward God offers would be eternal. This is the perspective of persevering faith that, in earnest anticipation of eternal reward, bears proudly the temporary disgraces and rejection that come with following Christ.

Coram Deo

Have you embraced the reproach of Christ? Do you consider the shame that might come from following Him in the eyes of the world to be greater than all the world has to offer? Take some time to look at your life, and see if there are ways in which you can more visibly bear the reproach of Christ. In prayer, ask God to help you do so.

Passages for Further Study

Jer. 20:1-2

Matt. 6:19-21

Mark 13:13

2 Cor. 12:10

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