

Introduction to Habakkuk  
Dr. Steven R. Cook

**Author:**

The book was written by Habakkuk, who is called a “prophet” in the opening verse (Hab 1:1). Habakkuk chapter 3 was written as a Psalm, “For the choir director, on my stringed instruments” (Hab 3:19). This might imply the prophet belonged to the Levitical priesthood which was known for their music and worship (Ezr 3:10; Neh 12:27).

**Audience:**

Habakkuk wrote to Judah about his conversation with God concerning why the Lord would use the wicked Babylonians to judge His people for their sins.

**Date of Ministry:**

Habakkuk wrote circa 609-606 B.C. This would be just prior the Babylonian invasion of Jerusalem in 605 B.C.

**Historical Background:**

Judah had experienced a time of great prosperity and spiritual reform under the reign of Josiah (640-609 B.C.). Josiah was regarded as a good king who obeyed the Lord (2 Ki 22:1-2; 23:25), and destroyed all the false idols and places of worship in Judah (2 Ki 23:1-25). However, the outward reforms did not lead to regeneration or revival among God’s people, and after Josiah was killed in battle by Pharaoh Neco (2 Ki 23:29), “the people of the land took Jehoahaz the son of Josiah and anointed him and made him king in place of his father” (2 Ki 23:30). Jehoahaz only reigned three months (2 Ki 23:31), and during that short time “did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done” (2 Ki 23:32). Afterwards, Pharaoh Neco appointed Jehoiakim as king in Judah (2 Ki 23:34-36), and he “did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done” (2 Ki 23:37). Jehoiakim led the people back into evil ways and practiced violence and injustice (Jer 22:13-21). This forms the background for Habakkuk’s complaints of violence in Judah (Hab 1:2-4, 9; 2:8, 17).

Outside the land of Judah, Assyria fell in 612 B.C. to the Babylonians and Medes under the leadership of Nabopolassar and Cyaxeres. A few years later, Egypt fell in 605 B.C. to the Babylonians under the leadership of Nabopolassar, who defeated Pharaoh Neco II at the battle of Carchemish.

## Habakkuk's Message:

Habakkuk witnessed great violence and corruption in Judah under the leadership of Jehoiakim; and this experience moved the prophet to question *where was God* and *what was He doing to address it* (Hab 1:2-4). The question of why God permits His people to experience evil has been posed by others throughout history (i.e. Job, Asaph, Jeremiah; Job 19:1-7; Psa 73:1-28; Jer 20:7-10). God revealed to Habakkuk His plan to use the Babylonians to judge Judah for their sin (Hab 1:5-11); but this raised another question in the prophet's mind, which is why would a holy and righteous God use the violent and sinful Babylonians to judge a people less sinful than themselves (Hab 1:12—2:1)? God explained that even though He's going to use the Babylonians as His disciplinary agent against Judah, He will also judge the Babylonians for their sins, and will do so in His time and way (Hab 2:2-20). In the midst of this judgment, God tells His prophet to remain faithful, along with the rest of the righteous remnant in Judah, saying, "the righteous will live by his faith" (Hab 2:4).<sup>1</sup> This is the key verse in Habakkuk. The idea is that the righteous will continue to be faithful to God and He will not kill them in the judgment, but will let them live, even though some of the righteous would go into captivity, such as Daniel and Ezekiel (who would serve as models of faith for Israelites living outside the land). Habakkuk responds in faith by offering a prayer-song of praise to God (Hab 3:1-19).

## Outline:

1. Introduction (Hab 1:1)
2. Habakkuk presents his first complaint to God (Hab 1:2-4)
3. God answers Habakkuk with His first solution (Hab 1:5-11)
4. Habakkuk presents his second complaint to God (Hab 1:12—2:1)
5. God answers Habakkuk with His second solution (Hab 2:2-20)
6. Habakkuk responds in faith with a prayer-song (Hab 3:1-19)

---

<sup>1</sup> Other translations read, "the person of integrity will live because of his faithfulness" (Hab 2:4 NET), and "the righteous person will live by his faithfulness" (Hab 2:4 NIV). New testament writers cite this verse three times, each with a different emphasis (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). Paul cites it in Romans 1:17 to emphasize *the righteousness* that comes from God on the basis of faith. He cites it again in Galatians 3:11 to emphasize *the life* that comes from faith in God. And the writer to the Hebrews cites the verse in Hebrews 10:38 to emphasize *the faithfulness* of the believer that God rewards.

## Habakkuk 1:1-17

The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw. <sup>2</sup> How long, O LORD, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, “Violence!” [סָחַח *chamas* – *violence, wrong*; cf. vss. 1:3, 9; 2:8, 17] Yet You do not save. <sup>3</sup> Why do You make me see iniquity [in Judah], and cause *me* to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises [other prophets mention the violence they witnessed; Jer 6:7; Eze 7:23; Zep 1:9]. <sup>4</sup> Therefore the law [תּוֹרָה *torah* – *direction, instruction, law*; i.e. God’s revealed standard of righteousness] is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked [who ignore the law] surround the righteous [who obey the law]; therefore, justice comes out perverted [the advances of the wicked meant civil justice was being corrupted]. <sup>5</sup> “Look among the nations! [i.e. look beyond your immediate situation] Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because *I am* doing something in your days—you would not believe if you were told. <sup>6</sup> “For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans [Babylonians], that fierce and impetuous people who march throughout the earth to seize dwelling places which are not theirs [Ezekiel described the Babylonians as ruthless; Ezek 28:7; 30:11]. <sup>7</sup> “They are dreaded and feared; their justice and authority originate with themselves [i.e. recognize no law but their own]. <sup>8</sup> “Their horses are swifter than leopards and keener than wolves in the evening. Their horsemen come galloping, their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swooping *down* to devour. <sup>9</sup> “All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces *moves* forward. They collect captives like sand. <sup>10</sup> “They mock at kings and rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress and heap up rubble to capture it. <sup>11</sup> “Then they will sweep through [Judah] *like* the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty [by God], they whose strength is their god.” <sup>12</sup> Are You not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One? We will not die [Habakkuk knows his covenant-keeping God is eternal and holy; therefore, His covenant will endure, sin will be addressed, and a remnant will survive]. You, O LORD, have appointed them [Babylonians] to judge; and You, O Rock, have established them to correct. <sup>13</sup> *Your* eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness *with favor*. Why do You look with favor on those [Babylonians] who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked [Babylonians] swallow up those more righteous than they? [to Habakkuk, the cure seems worse than the disease, as he struggles to accept God’s answer] <sup>14</sup> *Why* have You made men like the fish of the sea, like creeping things without a ruler over them? [i.e. helpless against their captors] <sup>15</sup> *The Chaldeans* bring all of them up with a hook [both the wicked and the righteous], drag them away with their net, and gather them together in their fishing net. Therefore they [Babylonians] rejoice and are glad [at their spoil]. <sup>16</sup> 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 [they worship what brings them their wealth]. <sup>17</sup> Will they therefore empty their net and continually slay nations without sparing? [i.e. will God allow them to continue their violence toward other nations?]

## Summary:

The opening sentence identifies Habakkuk as God's prophet (Hab 1:1). Habakkuk is troubled by the violence and injustice he sees in Judah and brings his frustrations directly to God, who is the only one who can really correct the situation. But it seems to the prophet that God is not answering his prayers; therefore, he asks, "How long, O LORD, will I call for help, and You will not hear? I cry out to You, 'Violence!' Yet You do not save" (Hab 1:2). Habakkuk knew his people were in a covenant relationship with God and wondered why God had not acted to deal with the violence within the country (Lev 26; Deu 28). He asked God, "Why do You make me see iniquity, and cause *me* to look on wickedness? Yes, destruction and violence are before me; strife exists and contention arises" (Hab 1:3). The wicked were disregarding God, "Therefore the law is ignored and justice is never upheld. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted" (Hab 1:4). The wicked are those who ignore God and His commands and live as they please. The righteous are those who understand and obey God's laws. It seemed to Habakkuk that the wicked had imprisoned the righteous and that civil justice was being perverted. Job (Job 19:1-7), Asaph (Psa 73:1-28), and Jeremiah (Jer 20:7-12) also questioned God when faced with suffering, especially when the wicked seemed to get away with violence while the righteous agonized. God answered Habakkuk's prayer with news he did not expect to hear and was challenged to believe (Hab 1:5). God was going to raise up the Chaldeans, a fierce and violent people, to discipline the sinning Judahites (Hab 1:6-11). This judgment was consistent with the curses set forth in the Mosaic Law (Deu 28:25, 36, 47-52). God had used the Babylonians to defeat the Assyrians in 612 B.C. (Nah 3:1-4), and He would now use them to discipline Judah. Having heard God's answer, Habakkuk replied (Hab 1:12-17). The prophet opens his prayer with the truth that his covenant-keeping God is eternal and holy; therefore, His covenant will endure, sin will be addressed, and a remnant will survive (Hab 1:12). But then he raises his concern about God's character and actions, saying, "*Your* eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness *with favor*. Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?" (Hab 1:13). The Babylonians, comparatively, were more violent than the Judahites, so it naturally came as a shock to Habakkuk that God would use these people to discipline Judah. How could a holy and righteous God use people more wicked than Judah to accomplish His will? The reality was that Judah was held to a higher standard than the Gentile nations, because they were in a covenant relationship with God and possessed His Word as a guide to moral righteousness. It demonstrates the principle that the one to whom much is given, much is required. Habakkuk then compared Judah to fish in the sea and the Babylonians as fishermen who catch them with their hooks and nets (Hab 1:14-15). He further comments that the Babylonians were guilty of worshipping the objects that brought them wealth (Hab 1:16), and wondered how long they'd continue (Hab 1:17). Afterward, Habakkuk stationed himself on his "guard post" in anticipation of God's reply (Hab 2:1).

## Habakkuk 2:1-20

I will stand on my guard post and station myself on the rampart; and I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved [Habakkuk patiently waits on the Lord].<sup>2</sup> Then the LORD answered me and said, “Record the vision and inscribe *it* on tablets, that the one who reads it [to know God’s will] may run [to safety to avoid judgment].<sup>3</sup> “For the vision is yet for the appointed time [i.e. the fulfillment of Hab 1:5-11]; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail [because God’s word is sure]. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come [in Habakkuk’s time], it will not delay.<sup>4</sup> “Behold, as for the proud one [i.e. the Chaldean], his soul is not right within him [i.e. not right with God]; but the righteous will live [i.e. be preserved physically through the Chaldean attack] by his faith [i.e. because of faithful obedience to God].<sup>5</sup> “Furthermore, wine betrays the haughty man [the Chaldean], so that he does not stay at home. He enlarges his appetite like Sheol [the place of the dead], and he is like death, never satisfied. He also gathers to himself all nations and collects to himself all peoples.<sup>6</sup> “Will not all of these [persecuted nations] take up a taunt-song against him, even mockery *and* insinuations against him and say, ‘Woe to him who increases what is not his—for how long—and makes himself rich with loans?’<sup>7</sup> “Will not your creditors rise up suddenly [i.e. those robbed by the Chaldeans], and those who collect from you awaken? Indeed, you will become plunder for them [a time of financial payback].<sup>8</sup> “Because you have looted many nations, all the remainder of the peoples will loot you—because of human bloodshed and violence [4x; cf. vss. 12, 17] done to the land, to the town and all its inhabitants.<sup>9</sup> “Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house to put his nest on high [i.e. to dwell safely], to be delivered from the hand of calamity! [to avoid the kind of violence they inflict]<sup>10</sup> “You have devised a shameful thing for your house by cutting off many peoples; so you are sinning against yourself.<sup>11</sup> “Surely the stone will cry out from the wall, and the rafter will answer it from the framework [the materials acquired through violence will testify again them].<sup>12</sup> “Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and founds a town with violence!<sup>13</sup> “Is it not indeed from the LORD of hosts [i.e. the Lord of the armies] that peoples toil for fire, and nations grow weary for nothing?<sup>14</sup> “For the earth will [in the future] be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD [in contrast to the widespread Babylonian violence], as [thoroughly as] the waters cover the sea.<sup>15</sup> “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!<sup>16</sup> “You will be filled with disgrace rather than honor. Now you yourself drink and expose your *own* nakedness. The cup [of judgment] in the LORD’S right hand [i.e. His strength; cf. Ex 15:6; Psa 98:1; Isa 41:10] will come around to you, and utter disgrace *will come* upon your glory.<sup>17</sup> “For the violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and the devastation of *its* beasts by which you terrified them, because of human bloodshed and violence done to the land, to the town and all its inhabitants.<sup>18</sup> “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.<sup>19</sup> “Woe to him who says to a *piece of wood*, ‘Awake!’ to a mute stone, ‘Arise!’ *And* that is *your* teacher? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is

no breath at all inside it.<sup>20</sup> “But the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him [as He stands in judgment].

## Summary

The chapter opens with Habakkuk waiting on the Lord’s reply (Hab 2:1). God answers him with a command to “Record the vision and inscribe *it* on tablets, that the one who reads it may run” (Hab 2:2). This could be understood to mean that the vision is sure, and the one who reads it will know to run for safety when he sees it coming to pass. Or, it could be translated, “Write down this vision; clearly inscribe it on tablets so one may easily read it” (CSB). Both renderings are possible, though I favor the first. God assures Habakkuk that the vision will certainly come to pass at God’s appointed time and that he should wait for it (Hab 2:3). The Lord then describes the Babylonian, saying, “Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith” (Hab 2:4a). Here we have a contrast of characters. The proud Babylonians did not live by faith in God, but by selfish ambition and might, and they would be judged by Him for their arrogance and abuses. In contrast, the righteous Israelites who were living in Judah would humble themselves and seek the Lord and “live by his faith” (Hab 2:4b). Other translations read, “the person of integrity will live because of his faithfulness” (Hab 2:4b NET), and “the righteous person will live by his faithfulness” (Hab 2:4. NIV). New testament writers cite this verse three times, each with a different emphasis (Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). Paul cites it in Romans 1:17 to emphasize *the righteousness* that comes from God on the basis of faith. He cites it again in Galatians 3:11 to emphasize *the life* that comes from faith in God. And the writer to the Hebrews cites the verse in Hebrews 10:38 to emphasize *the faithfulness* of the believer that God rewards. Though spiritual life is in view in the NT, it refers to physical life in the book of Habakkuk. The idea is that the righteous will continue to be faithful to God and He will not kill them in the Babylonian invasion, but will let them live. Some of the righteous who went into captivity included Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, Mishael and Ezekiel. These faithful men served as models of righteousness for Israelites living outside the land. Referring to the Babylonians, God reveals they were given over to alcohol and violence, and, like death and the grave, seemed only to consume and never be satisfied, gathering more and more people and possessions to themselves (Hab 2:5). But these defeated peoples will one day take up a taunt-song against the Babylonians (Hab 2:6b). Habakkuk 2:6-20 presents five woes against the Chaldeans. Here, God reveals to Habakkuk the reasons why He will bring judgment on the Babylonians: 1) they greedily looted nations (Hab 2:6-8), 2) sought to secure themselves with their stolen wealth (Hab 2:9-11), 3) built their city with bloodshed (Hab 2:12-14), 4) exploited others sexually and with violence (Hab 2:15-17), and, 5) worshipped idols (Hab 2:18-19; cf. Deu 32:17; 1 Cor 10:20). The first four woes describe Chaldean acts against other people, whereas the last woe is against God. Though Babylon would seem unstoppable for a time, God would bring them into judgment, for “the LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him” (Hab 2:20). The Babylonians in Habakkuk’s time were behaving similarly to ancient Babylon, which

emphasized self-reliance over trust in the Lord. God judged ancient Babylon by confusing their languages and scattering them over the earth (Gen 11:1-9), and He destroyed the Neo-Babylonians in 539 B.C. by means of the Medes and Persians (Dan 5:1-31). The values and practices of self-reliance and self-exaltation continue worldwide and will be centralized again in the future city of Babylon, which will be destroyed at the Second coming of Jesus.

## Habakkuk 3:1-19

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth [perhaps a lively rhythm].<sup>2</sup> LORD, I have heard the report about You [concerning His judgment on Judah and destruction of Babylon] and I fear. O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years [i.e. in Habakkuk's day], in the midst of the years make it known [or "In our time repeat those deeds; in our time reveal them again" (NET)]; in wrath remember mercy [toward His people].<sup>3</sup> God comes from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran [a recollection of when God came to His people and formed a covenant with them]. Selah. His splendor covers the heavens, and the earth is full of His praise [probably referring to His glory that descended at mount Sinai].<sup>4</sup> His radiance is like the sunlight; He has rays flashing from His hand, and there is the hiding of His power [behind His revealed glory].<sup>5</sup> Before Him goes pestilence, and plague comes after Him [in judgment].<sup>6</sup> He stood and surveyed the earth; He looked and startled the nations. Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered, the ancient hills collapsed [when the mountains trembled at Sinai; see Ex 19:16-19]. His ways are everlasting.<sup>7</sup> I saw the tents of Cushan under distress, the tent curtains of the land of Midian were trembling [at the Lord's deliverance of Israel from Egypt; see Ex 15:14-16; Deu 2:25; Josh 2:9].<sup>8</sup> Did the LORD rage against the rivers, or was Your anger against the rivers [of the Nile or Jordan; Ex 7:20-21; Josh 3:14-17], or was Your wrath against the sea [i.e. the Red Sea; Ex 14:15-16; 15:8], that You rode on Your horses, on Your chariots of salvation? [to deliver His people]<sup>9</sup> Your bow was made bare, the rods of chastisement were sworn [in judgment against His enemies]. Selah. You cleaved the earth with rivers.<sup>10</sup> The mountains saw You and quaked; the downpour of waters swept by. The deep uttered forth its voice, it lifted high its hands [i.e. nature trembles at God's wrath].<sup>11</sup> Sun and moon stood in their places; they went away at the light of Your arrows, at the radiance of Your gleaming spear [when God caused the sun and moon to stop until Israel's enemies were defeated; see Josh 10:12-13].<sup>12</sup> In indignation You marched through the earth; in anger You trampled the nations [as Israel took the promised land].<sup>13</sup> You went forth for the salvation of Your people, for the salvation of Your anointed [perhaps king David]. You struck the head of the house of the evil to lay him open from thigh to neck [i.e. defeated David's enemies]. Selah.<sup>14</sup> You pierced with his own spears the head of his throngs. They stormed in to scatter us; their exultation was like those who devour the oppressed in secret.<sup>15</sup> You trampled on the sea with Your horses, on the surge of many waters [just as God had defeated previous nations, so He would destroy the Babylonians].<sup>16</sup> I heard and my inward parts trembled, at the sound my lips quivered. Decay enters my bones, and in my place I tremble. Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us.<sup>17</sup> 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 [i.e. judgment on the land],<sup>18</sup> Yet [in spite of the difficulties] I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation [praise by faith].<sup>19</sup> The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' feet, and makes me walk on my high places. For the choir director, on my stringed instruments.

## Summary:

Habakkuk became fearful at the Lord's reply to his questions (Hab 3:1-2a), knowing God was bringing judgment both upon Judah and Babylon, and this prompted him to write a prayer-song of praise to God for His past and future acts of judgment. Habakkuk petitioned the Lord: 1) to do a visible work of judgment in his day, and 2) to remember mercy in judgment (Hab 3:2b). In the remainder of the chapter, Habakkuk set forth a history lesson of God's works when He delivered His people from the Egyptian bondage. This history lesson assured Habakkuk that God would also deliver His people from Babylonian oppression. The prophet recalls when God entered into a covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai, where He brought them after bringing plagues of judgment upon Egypt. God's judgment upon Egypt when He delivered His people caused the other nations to tremble in fear (Hab 3:3-7; cf. Ex 15:14-16; Deu 2:25; Josh 2:9). During His acts of deliverance, God's anger and wrath were said to be against the rivers and sea (Hab 3:8-9), which most likely refers to the Nile (Ex 7:20-21), Jordan (Josh 3:14-17), and Red Sea (Ex 14:15-16; 15:8). God is pictured as a Warrior whose "bow was made bare, [and] the rods [arrows] of chastisement were sworn" (Hab 3:9). At this awesome picture, "The mountains saw You *and* quaked; the downpour of waters swept by. The deep uttered forth its voice, it lifted high its hands" (Hab 3:10). Habakkuk's language is comparable to Psalm 77:16-18, which poetically describes God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The prophet then describes the time when God caused the sun to stand still when Joshua was fighting to take the land (Hab 3:11; cf. Josh 10:12-13), and then as He conquered the nations as His people entered Canaan (Hab 3:12). Habakkuk then pictures God as a Warrior who delivers His people and His anointed king, perhaps from the Babylonians (Hab 3:13a). After the Lord strikes down "the head of the house of the evil to lay him open from thigh to neck" (Hab 3:13b), He takes his weapons from his dead body and uses them to defeat "the head of his throngs" (Hab. 3:14a). And who are the defeated ones? Likely the Babylonians who "stormed in to scatter us; their exultation *was* like those who devour the oppressed in secret" (Hab 3:14b). It was upon these that the Lord "trampled on the sea with Your horses, on the surge of many waters" (Hab 3:15). If this interpretation is accurate, then the statement would be proleptic, seeing the future destruction of Babylon as so certain, that the prophet speaks of it as already having come to pass. After reflecting on God's past judgments and deliverances (Hab 3:3-15), he returns to the present situation and trembles at the prospect of the Babylonian invasion (Hab 3:16a), in which he waits "quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise *who* will invade us" (Hab 3:16b). Though Habakkuk anticipated judgment, which included famine upon the land (Hab 3:17), yet, he declares, "I will exult in the LORD, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation" (Hab 3:18). Though he cannot stop the trouble that's coming, he fixes his hope on the Lord who is in control of these events. Here, Habakkuk is doing what pleases the Lord, as he lives by faith in God (Hab 2:4b). With his faith fixed completely on the Lord, he states, "The Lord GOD is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds' *feet*, and makes me walk on my high places" (Hab 3:19a). He concludes

his prayer-song by sending it to “the choir director, [to be played] on my stringed instruments” (Hab 3:19b).