

## **Unmet Expectations**

### **Habakkuk 1:1-11**

Last week we started to look at a little book in the Old Testament called Habakkuk. It was written by a prophet who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah during the years of national decline leading up to the Babylonian invasion and captivity, just before 600 B.C. It's a book that shows us a major transformation in the life of a prophet who was right in the middle of some really terrible circumstances. At the beginning of the book he was filled with questions and doubts about what God was doing, but by the end he's rejoicing in the Lord even though his circumstances hadn't changed. What I hope to see happen for all of us is that by studying this little book, God will reveal to us how we too can rise above the waves of life's circumstances and stand firm with joy in the Lord no matter what's going on around us.

Today we dig into the first chapter of this book and immediately we are confronted with a prophet who is not doing well. Terrible things are happening all around him and they had been bad for a long period of time and he's reached the point of overwhelming frustration. It's the kind of frustration we feel when someone has failed to meet our expectations.

Picture a husband and wife out Christmas shopping. They've been shopping all day and the husband is getting tired. They've bought all kinds of gifts for family and friends and it feels like they're pretty much done, but the wife asks to go to one more store to find one final gift. So they stop at the store and the husband assumes it will be a quick in and out, so he drops her off and stays in the car to make it easier.

10 minutes go by and he starts to wonder, "What's taking her so long?" 15 minutes goes by and he gets a little frustrated: "What's she doing in there? Doesn't she realize I'm waiting? I bet she's trying on a bunch of clothes and she she's forgotten about me." 20 minutes passes and he just can't take it any longer. "Of all the selfish things she could do! I've shopped with her all day. I've helped her get the stuff in the car. I even took her out for a nice lunch. Doesn't she realize I'm tired and want to go home?! Of all the inconsiderate things she could do, she's making me sit here and wait for her!"

So finally he gets out of the car, trying to hold in his frustration, on a mission to find her and tell her how unthoughtful and selfish she was. But as he pushes through the front door he sees her in the checkout line. And she's got the brand new tool set he had been wanting to get all year. She was buying *his* Christmas gift! Feeling a bit like a schmuck, he walks up to her and when she sees him a smile crosses her face, "Merry Christmas honey. Sorry it took so long. I didn't know which one was best, so I had to wait for the hardware manager to come show me and he was with another customer."

Hopefully that hasn't happened to you, but I think that all of us can relate to what it's like to have unmet expectations of someone and get frustrated with having to wait. We can then start to make assumptions of what they're doing and faulty accusations. I think that's what the first part of Habakkuk is all about, only the person being waited for is God. You can hear Habakkuk's frustration as he begins the book.

Habakkuk 1:1-4

*<sup>1</sup> The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.*

*<sup>2</sup> O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? <sup>3</sup> Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. <sup>4</sup> So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.*

The circumstances that Habakkuk was facing were really bad. From what I can tell based on the historical clues in the book, he was writing about things that were happening in Jerusalem and Judah during the reign of a king named Manasseh. Manasseh was the king that began the final decline of the nation of Judah. His father, Hezekiah, had been a good king, but Manasseh was not. In fact it sounds like he was one of the most wicked kings the nation of Judah had ever seen.

Read 2 Kings 21:1-6; 9; 16.

*Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Hephzibah. <sup>2</sup> And he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the despicable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel. <sup>3</sup> For he rebuilt the high places that Hezekiah his father had destroyed, and he erected altars for Baal and made an*

*Asherah, as Ahab king of Israel had done, and worshiped all the host of heaven and served them. <sup>4</sup> And he built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, "In Jerusalem will I put my name." <sup>5</sup> And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. <sup>6</sup> And he burned his son as an offering and used fortune-telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger... <sup>9</sup> Manasseh led them astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel... <sup>16</sup> Moreover, Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another.*

According to Jewish historian Josephus: *"He barbarously slew all the righteous men that were among the Hebrews; nor would he spare the prophets, for he every day slew some of them, till Jerusalem was overflown with blood."* This was the world Habakkuk lived in and it grieved him deeply. He apparently was not at all like the people around him. He was a godly and righteous man who was devoted to the Lord and sought to obey the laws of the covenant. But all around him he saw violence, wickedness, and destruction. The law was useless because the leadership was corrupt. The wicked outnumbered and overpowered the righteous and there was no justice other than a corrupt system.

So as he saw all the terrible things that were happening around him he prayed – he cried out to God for salvation, and an end to the wickedness, violence and misery in his community. But nothing happened. Nothing changed. Apparently he had been praying for a long time and knowing the length of Manasseh's reign, it could have been decades of prayer. But still there was no answer; no relief. Just the same terrible wickedness.

How many of you have been in a similar situation? It might be because of wickedness in our society: racism, human trafficking, rampant sexual immorality, abortion, abuse, godlessness... Or it might be because of painful circumstances in your own life: disease, financial problems, marriage problems, injustice at work... You've been facing some serious problems for quite some time and you've been praying for help, but nothing has changed. There's no answer from God; no relief. Just the same suffering.

How do you feel when you're in the middle of something like that? You probably feel a lot like Habakkuk. You probably have a lot of doubts and questions about

God. You probably have frustration and accusations aimed in his direction. Habakkuk sure made some accusations: “God you’re ignoring me! You don’t care! You don’t fight evil!” “You’re inattentive, indifferent, and unjust!” Habakkuk exposes some thoughts that probably hit pretty close to home when we’re dealing with ongoing suffering. “God, why don’t you do anything? Why don’t you heal? Why don’t you step in? Why don’t you fix this?” Going through times of long-term suffering can make us feel like God is failing.

Why does it feel like that? I think it has to do with unmet expectations. I think all of us have certain expectations of God when it comes to how we think our lives should go. God has given us many things in this world to enjoy and we expect that he wants us to enjoy them. Beauty, success, strength, friendship, marriage, family, health, peace, prosperity, pleasure, fulfilling and thrilling experiences – all of these are good gifts that God gives in this world to enjoy. So we expect that God will bring about or at least allow these things to happen.

But at some point in life, we all run into problems – happiness killing problems. We have some kind of blemish that mars our beauty, some kind of limitation that hinders our success, some kind of problem that diminishes our strength, some kind of conflict that deteriorates our friendships or marriage, singleness or divorce disrupts our family, injury or disease destroys our health, arguments and fighting ruin our peace, there are barriers to our prosperity, roadblocks to our pleasure, inabilities that limit our fulfilling or thrilling experiences.

These problems don’t match up with our expectations and the kind of life we believe God wants for us, so we expect that he will remove them. If we ask according to his will and by faith and in Jesus’ name, and we ask earnestly and persistently, we expect God will remove them. But oftentimes he doesn’t. Oftentimes they end up temporarily or permanently affecting our lives in a negative way. And now we have a major dilemma on our hands, similar to what Habakkuk was experiencing.

Life didn’t turn out like we expected and God didn’t seem to do anything about it. And then questions and doubts arise: Is God really good? Does he really love me? Does he hear me? Is he really able to do anything? If he is, why doesn’t he do anything? Our faith takes a major hit. We don’t really see the point in praying anymore. We struggle with bitterness and darkness and feel like giving up. It feels

like life isn't worth living. And we don't know what to do about our relationship with God anymore. If we want the right things and ask for the right things in the right way and God doesn't do them, what's left other than to feel like God has failed us in some way?

Well God did something with Habakkuk that he doesn't usually do with us. He showed him what was going on behind the scenes – for his benefit and probably for ours. He showed him why he hadn't answered his prayers yet.

Habakkuk 1:5-11.

*<sup>5</sup> “Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. <sup>6</sup> For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own. <sup>7</sup> They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. <sup>8</sup> Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour. <sup>9</sup> They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. <sup>10</sup> At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it. <sup>11</sup> Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!”*

So God's answer to Habakkuk was, “I am going to raise up the dreaded and fearsome Chaldean army – the Assyrians and Babylonians.” And he doesn't tell him exactly what they were going to do, but Habakkuk's assumption was that they were going to carry out God's judgment against Judah – we'll see that next week. And that assumption would eventually turn out to be correct. The Babylonians would one day utterly destroy the nation of Judah and carry the survivors into captivity. But before that day of judgment, the Chaldeans would play another role as well – a role that God didn't reveal to Habakkuk and was beyond his ability to see or even imagine... We read about it in 2 Chronicles 33.

Read 2 Chronicles 33:10-13, 15-16.

*The Lord spoke to Manasseh and to his people, but they paid no attention.*

*<sup>11</sup> Therefore the Lord brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who captured Manasseh with hooks and bound him with chains of bronze and brought him to Babylon. <sup>12</sup> And when he was in distress, he entreated*

*the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. <sup>13</sup> He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord was God... <sup>15</sup> And he took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the Lord, and all the altars that he had built on the mountain of the house of the Lord and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside of the city. <sup>16</sup> He also restored the altar of the Lord and offered on it sacrifices of peace offerings and of thanksgiving, and he commanded Judah to serve the Lord, the God of Israel.*

We can't even imagine how unbelievable this was – how impossible. This would be like Saddam Hussein being captured by the U.S. Army, turning to the Lord and being allowed to go back to Iraq to lead his people in a national revival. The same king that had done so much evil and had turned his entire nation against the Lord would lead the people of Judah in a nationwide revival for the rest of his years as king.

Habakkuk had no way of knowing that was going to happen. All he could see was the wickedness and violence around him and the seeming inaction of God so he got frustrated and made accusations. But God was always at work. He would bring about the things that Habakkuk had asked for and he would do it in a way that Habakkuk couldn't imagine.

That's something all of us need to remember. Sometimes God doesn't meet our expectations in this life and we go through a lot of suffering. Sometimes he doesn't answer our prayers within the timeframe we expect and we have to wait, maybe even decades like Habakkuk. And sometimes we feel like God has failed. But the reality is that God is at work, doing things beyond our ability to see. We see one piece of the puzzle; God sees the whole thing.

It's not that we're asking for the wrong things; it's not that he doesn't hear us; it's not that he's inattentive, indifferent, or unjust. It's not that he's failed. It's that he's God and we are not. And he sees and knows things that we don't have the ability to see. We may not know what he's doing or how long it's going to take or even if we will see the answers during our lifetime, but we can know that he is working and our life is in God's hands. He hasn't abandoned us. He hasn't

forgotten. He hasn't failed. And he will be with us no matter what we're going through if we will trust him and not shut him out.

That's what I think we can learn from this first part of the book of Habakkuk. And in the coming weeks we are going to see that even in the midst of our suffering and troubling circumstances, we can actually experience joy and happiness – a greater joy and happiness than even the best things in this world can bring. Some of you may be going through a lot right now and need some time to respond to these things. We're going to be moving into a time of worship when you can just pray and talk to God if you need. After church, if you need to talk to someone about what you're going through, get in touch with a Christian friend or pastor or elder who can help you and walk with you.