

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
October 5, 2014

Lesson Text: Habakkuk 2:1-5; 3:17-19
Lesson Title: Rejoice Anyway

Introduction

The prophet Habakkuk is one of the twelve prophets in the Old Testament classified as the Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). He appears on the scene unannounced. Who he was, and from what family or background he came we are not told. His birth and death is not recorded. Sometimes the Lord withholds that information to help us remember that it is the message, not the man that is important.

Habakkuk's name means "embrace" which is fitting because all Habakkuk could do in these difficult days was to embrace his faith in the Lord. Keeping faith was not easy because Habakkuk came on the scene to warn Judah of her coming judgment at the hands of the Chaldeans. Some date Habakkuk's writing near 630 B.C., but no kings or timeline is mentioned in the book to verify the exact date of the writing.

When Habakkuk prophesied, the southern kingdom, Judah was deeply entrenched in her sin. The northern kingdom, Israel, had already been destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. as God judged them for their idolatry. It is also possible that King Nebuchadnezzar had already carried many of Jerusalem's nobles and leaders into captivity (Habakkuk 1:6).

The historical and spiritual situation in Habakkuk was similar to the days of Amos and Micah. Violence and wickedness were rampant and sin was unrestrained. It was in that atmosphere that Habakkuk cried out in prayer unto the Lord (Habakkuk 1:2-4). In that prayer he expressed his questions and his confusion. Speaking of Habakkuk, Doctor J. Vernon McGee said, "In the opening words of his prophecy, Habakkuk's brain was one big question mark." Habakkuk couldn't understand why God didn't forgive His people of their sin and restore righteousness to the land (Habakkuk 1:2). But more than that, Habakkuk questioned God's wisdom because he didn't understand why God would use the Chaldeans to judge a people more righteous than they (Habakkuk 2:2-20). Habakkuk logically concluded that since God is holy, He should judge the Chaldeans first. Habakkuk would learn as we must learn, God's ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:9).

Habakkuk's Attitude of Faith Theologically (Habakkuk 2:1-5)

Although Habakkuk didn't understand God's plan to judge the nation or why God planned to use the wicked Chaldeans to minister that judgment, he did accept the fact that it was coming and he needed to talk to the Lord about it. Sometimes it is difficult to talk to the Lord about our doubts and questions. It is also difficult to wait on the Lord and trust Him in trying times.

Verse 1

"I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reprov'd."

It seems there was no immediate answer to Habakkuk's questions and complaints. So, Habakkuk speaks to himself, "I will stand upon my watch..." and he decides to continue to pray and wait upon the Lord. Instead of quitting or giving up he goes to the "watchtower" to pray and wait. The "tower" spoken of here is a reference to a city watchtower and Habakkuk's use of the word suggests the language of a military defense. A "watchtower" in biblical times was usually located somewhere on the corners of the city walls and was used for surveillance of the enemy. Standing on "the tower" would give Habakkuk a good vantage point from which he could "watch to see" what God would "say unto me" in answer to his questions.

The text does not suggest that Habakkuk literally climbed up into a "tower." This is about his attitude of faith and his acceptance of God's ways in spite of the fact that he didn't understand all that was taking place. "Perplexed and confused by the strangeness of God's ways, Habakkuk takes his stand upon the "tower," above the mists of earth, and beyond the thoughts and doings of men, where he can quietly wait upon God, and look out to see what He will say unto him" (The Minor Prophets, page 283, par.3, H.A. Ironside).

The phrase "and what I shall answer when I am reprov'd" suggests that Habakkuk did not expect to get "raked over the coals" by the Lord, but he did expect God to correct him if needed. God does not scold us or punish us when we bring our concerns to Him (James 1:5). Habakkuk's attitude is such that will surely receive an answer from the Lord. God will not leave his servant without guidance and instruction if there is a willing mind and a humble heart.

Note: No matter how difficult life gets and no matter dissatisfied we are with what the Lord seems to be doing or not doing, we must not give up. There is only one thing to save us in these trying times, and the answer is to shut ourselves up with the Lord and wait upon Him (Isaiah 40:31).

Verse 2

"And the LORD answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it."

The text doesn't tell us how long Habakkuk waited, but Habakkuk says, "the LORD answered me." The word "answered" means "God responded specifically to Habakkuk's questions." Habakkuk addresses God as "LORD." "LORD" is the Hebrew name "Jehovah, the self-existing One." That is God's national name for the Jewish people. Habakkuk is addressing the One who is in control of the nation's future and his personal future.

The Lord tells Habakkuk to "Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it." Several truths emerge from this verse. First, the "vision," or revelation God is about to give to Habakkuk is not for Habakkuk alone. It is for all men to read. When God told Habakkuk to "write" He is telling Habakkuk that he must first see and then others will be able to see. Second, the "vision" was to be written "upon tables." When something is "written" it signifies a permanent impact. What God says and reveals to us through His Word should make a permanent impact upon us first and then upon those to whom we preach, teach, and witness. Should we not rejoice today because we have the "written word of God?" Third, Habakkuk was to "make it plain." The word "plain" means "to engrave so as to be easily read." Habakkuk needed to hear what God was about to say and so did others. There is nothing spiritual or beneficial about making God's message difficult to understand. People need to plainly hear what God has said. Fourth, the "vision" God was giving would result in activity and progress. "That he may run that readeth it" means that as one reads this "vision" or revelation from God Habakkuk has written, it will stir him to activity and he will carry the message to others as a courier would deliver a telegram. Notice, it doesn't say "that he who runs may read it." It says, "that he may run that readeth it." The "running" comes from the message! The individual is not running while he reads it, he is running because he has read it (1 Peter 3:15). Any progress or success of the message God has given will come from those who have been affected by it.

Verse 3

"For the vision *is* yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry."

The "vision" Habakkuk is receiving is a word from God. This "vision," or word from God is "yet for an appointed time." According to verse 2, God had already given the message to Habakkuk. He had already written it down. It could be read. If that is true, how could it be for "an appointed time?" "Yet for an appointed time" means Habakkuk spoke to an age beyond his time, beyond the present moment. What God has revealed to Habakkuk is not just for the present time alone. It would have a fuller, wider application in a future time the Lord would determine.

The word “it” is used five times in this verse. “It” is referring to the “vision.” The promise of God to Habakkuk is that “it,” or the “vision” will “speak, and not lie.” The word “speak” means “a breath of fresh air.” What God has promised will come to pass. It will be like a breath of fresh air. “It,” or the “vision” may seem to “tarry” or be delayed. It may seem like it will never come to pass. We’re all human and we want to see things happen now! But God tells Habakkuk to “wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.” “Will not tarry” means that although it seems to “tarry” or be delayed, “it” will come to pass exactly when God brings it to pass.

The “it” of this verse is not only speaking about the message God is giving of the captivity in Babylon and the promised return from that captivity, but it is speaking of glorious days much further down the road. God was giving Habakkuk a promise that would eventually be fulfilled in the coming Messiah, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The Hebrew writer applied Habakkuk 2:3 like this, “*For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry*” (Hebrews 10:37). The Hebrew writer changes the “it” in Habakkuk’s prophesy to “he” referring to Jesus Christ.

God was telling Habakkuk, “All of this will be over one day. I’ll judge my people and then one day bring them home. Then I’ll deal with the Babylonians and everyone who opposed my people. Just wait, Habakkuk. One day it will be over.” The Hebrew writer took that verse and applied it to some Jews who had left Judaism and trusted Christ. For many different reasons they were thinking about going back to Judaism. The Hebrew writer says, “Don’t go back. Christ is coming and He won’t tarry. Just be patient and keep pressing on. Jesus will surely come!”

What is God saying to us today? He’s saying, “I know you’re in a sinful world and it seems that everything holy and righteous is being replaced with wickedness and sinfulness. Look up! Don’t be discouraged. Christ is coming.” God’s Word will “speak.” The truth of God’s promises are a “breath of fresh air” to God’s child. Keep rejoicing! Don’t allow the scoffers to discourage you (2 Peter 3:4).

Note: Child of God, rest in God’s Word. Take courage in the promises of God’s Word (Psalm 138:2).

Verse 4

“Behold, his soul *which* is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.”

Once Habakkuk had received a word from God about the future he must do something with it. There are two responses to God’s Word in this verse just as they are today. First, “his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him” refers to

people who are proud and not right with God. Most scholars believe this is a reference to the Chaldeans. The people God was using to humble His own people were puffed up with pride. God was saying to Habakkuk, “Don’t worry about the Chaldeans. I know who they are.”

The proud and self-righteous are in every generation and in every culture. In fact, speaking of the last days, the Apostle Paul said, *“This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:1-4).*

Second, “the just shall live by his faith” is a reference to people who have been made righteous. People made righteous “live by faith” (Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11; Hebrews 10:38). In contrast to the proud Chaldeans whom God would eventually destroy, the “just” or righteous would be protected and preserved through his faithfulness to God. This is the heart of God’s message to Habakkuk and to us as believers. The difference in the believer from the unbeliever is the righteousness we have in Christ and the evidence of our belief in that as we live.

Child of God, rejoice. Rejoice and be glad that our victory and security today and tomorrow is not based on circumstances, feelings, or experience. It is based on faith. Habakkuk probably wasn’t feeling very well at the time God was giving him this prophesy. His circumstances were not the best. His experience in the days leading up to this word from God was filled with questions, doubts, and disapproval. But now he has a word from God. And that word is, “The just shall live by his faith.”

Verse 5

“Yea also, because he transgresseth by wine, *he is a proud man, neither be satisfied, but gathereth unto him all nations, and heapeth unto him all people:*”

“He” and “him” is a reference to the Chaldeans or the proud mentioned in the first part of verse 4. The nature of the proud man is described in several ways. First, “transgresseth by wine” speaks of people who associate themselves with intoxicating drinks in order to impress others. Proud people always want to be recognized, they want to stand out. Second, “neither keepeth at home” means proud people never find a place to rest. Third, “who enlargeth his desire as hell, and is as death, and cannot be satisfied, but gathereth unto him all nations, and heapeth unto him all people” means the proud can never be satisfied. They are always grasping after something. Like death, the proud man never has enough. The Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar were filled with a desire to

conquer and control that could never be satisfied no matter how many nations they destroyed. That was another reason for their punishment.

Habakkuk's Attitude of Faith Practically (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

Habakkuk 2 ends with "...the LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him" (Habakkuk 2:20). This is a heavenly scene depicting the Lord as the Sovereign Ruler of the universe and all the earth must bow and worship Him. As Habakkuk 3 opens, Habakkuk returns to his pleas for God's mercy on behalf of the judgment upon Judah. In Habakkuk 3:3-15, the prophet speaks about God's past intervention on Israel's behalf, referencing the Exodus and Canaan, and how God would deliver in the future.

Habakkuk is the same man in chapter 3 as he was in chapters 1 and 2. However, there is a difference. And the difference is he's a man that has prayed and he's a man that has trusted. Now, that trust is expressed in praise and rejoicing. It is one thing to say we believe God and trust His word. It is another thing to live that out practically. In Habakkuk 3:17-19, the prophet tells us how what he believes has affected how he will live until God intervenes again.

Verse 17

"Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither *shall* fruit *be* in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and *there shall be* no herd in the stalls:"

Realizing the coming judgment was certain and would be severe, Habakkuk had to respond one way or another. He said, "Although." This one single word, "Although" is a powerful word. Habakkuk is not resigned to the fact that difficult days are coming. He accepts it. And "although" they are, this is how he will respond.

Notice in this verse three negative statements made by Habakkuk concerning the future. One, "fig tree shall not blossom, no fruit in the vines" and "failure of olives" speaks of economic disaster. Two, "fields would yield not meat or food." Three, "flocks cut off from the fold, and no herd in the stalls" indicates crops and livestock not producing. This list is the routine, the ordinary, the dependable and necessary elements of life. Change them to the things today that are routine, dependable, ordinary and necessary. You might say, "Although a drought may kill all the vegetables from the West Coast to the East Coast, and although all the oil from the Middle East be cut off, and every power grid be damaged throughout the United States, and our food and water supply be limited." Sounds a little more serious now, doesn't it?

Verse 18

“Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.”

“Yet,” Habakkuk says he “will rejoice in the LORD” and he will “joy in the God of his salvation.” “Yet,” which is the same word as “rejoice,” is not one of those “I don’t have any other choice kind of words,” it is a word expressing “triumph.” Although everything dependable and necessary is in question, Habakkuk “rejoices” or “leaps for joy” in what is forever dependable, the Lord!

The word “joy” means Habakkuk is under the emotion of great gladness. The word is associated with strong emotion. The root of the word “joy” actually means “to spin around.” Please don’t miss the truth of what Habakkuk is saying here. This is not just an emotional high or a temporary feeling of better days ahead. The words “rejoice” and “joy” are words of resolve. Israel’s covenant God was still on the throne and Habakkuk decided to live by faith and trust Him to do what He promised. That is the basis of his rejoicing and his joy. “God,” Elohim, is on the throne and is sovereign in Habakkuk’s “salvation.”

Verse 19

“The LORD God *is* my strength, and he will make my feet like hinds' *feet*, and he will make me to walk upon mine high places. To the chief singer on my stringed instruments.”

Habakkuk declares that Jehovah the Lord is his “strength.” It is not that God had given Habakkuk “strength” or would give him “strength” in the future. The words means “God IS Habakkuk’s strength!” As difficult as the days ahead would be for Habakkuk, he rejoices that God would be his stability. Habakkuk illustrates that truth with a reference to “hinds feet.” The “hind” or a female doe or deer, was known for being a surefooted animal, able to walk on high and dangerous places. Habakkuk is visualizing and magnifying the security he has in God to walk through the coming days (Psalm 18:33-34).

“To the chief singer on my stringed instruments” indicates that the words of Habakkuk here were possibly used as a psalm of praise during worship. Doctor H.A. Ironside writes, “This closing line is unspeakably precious. The Chief Singer on stringed instruments is, for us, none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, who as the risen One now leads the praises of His redeemed. Alas, so many of our hearts are so often out of tune! Only by constant prayer and faith can we like Habakkuk, add to the sweetness of the great orchestra of the Chief Singer!”

Conclusion

The Bible is full of examples of people who rejoiced in spite of their circumstances. They were people just like you and me who had their questions and doubts and yet made a choice to be content and rejoice. In the Old

Testament, the prophet Jeremiah decided to rejoice not in his circumstances, but in God's Word (Jeremiah 15:16). In the New Testament, the apostles in Acts 5:41 were beaten for preaching the gospel. Instead of becoming bitter they left rejoice counting themselves unworthy to be persecuted for Jesus.

If you read your Bible and believe it, things are not going to get better. They are going to get worse. And if you understand anything about life you understand that things are rarely as we thought they would be. We never seem to earn enough money. Our children aren't as successful as we hoped they would be. Our homes could have been better if we had added space here or cut back there. The sickness or death that invaded our family seemed too severe or too soon. Our only peace and contentment comes from a living relationship with Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul said, "*...for I have learned in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content*" (Philippians 4:11).

Even though Habakkuk was terrified at the judgment that was coming, he knew he could decide how he would respond. He could sink in despair and defeat or he could rejoice in God's faithfulness. Thankfully, Habakkuk chose to rejoice.

Amen.