

Habakkuk: A Prophet Of Faith (Part One)

Habakkuk 1:1-2:3

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The book of Habakkuk is obviously a contemporary prophecy. For a book written in Judah more than 2,500 years ago, it deals with surprisingly modern problems which relate to both the nation and the church today.

Habakkuk preaches during the last breath of the nation of Judah. She is repeatedly called to change her destructive, sinful ways. Habakkuk sees the callousness of his country and asks God how long this intolerable condition will continue.

God replies that the Babylonians will be His rod of correction upon the nation of Judah. The revelation of this terrifies Habakkuk, bringing him to his knees.

The name “Habakkuk” gives a hint to the purpose of this book. Habakkuk is an unusual Hebrew name derived from the verb *habaq*, meaning “embrace.” So his name suggests one who embraces, or clings. At the end of this book this name becomes appropriate because Habakkuk chooses to cling firmly to God regardless of what happens to his nation. We find that in Habakkuk 3:16-19.

The battles that have been fought over the last few centuries have focused on the existence of God and how the revelation of scientific discoveries relate to human history. But this is no longer the case to the extent it used to be.

True, there are still people who wrestle with these problems: for example, those who argue the case for creationism against evolutionism. But the ground has shifted. Since Einstein’s discovery of relativity and similar insights in other areas, it has made science less sure of itself. It is far less inclined to speak in absolutes today, then it ever has.

Besides, the concerns of Christianity have also changed. Granted, it is still necessary to argue for the complete truthfulness of the Word of God, including those areas where the Bible touches on scientific concerns. But, for the most part, the questions have shifted and the problems bothering most thinking people today are what we would call personal and historical.

They boil down to the individual’s involvement in history. On the personal level, they express themselves in such questions as: “Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in this life?” On the historical level, they emerge as: “What is God’s involvement with history? Why has there been so much evil in history? How can I believe in a loving, personal God when He allows bad things to happen to me?”

Habakkuk raises these questions too and he asks, “Is God in charge of history?” and, “If He is, why do things happen as they do?” In dealing with these questions he speaks as directly to our own times as any comparable portion of the Word of God.

We do not know much about Habakkuk personally because he is not mentioned anywhere else in the Old Testament. But it is evident from the situation described in his book that he must have been writing sometime after the fall of Nineveh to the Babylonians in 612 BC, as prophesied by Nahum, and before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BC.

Habakkuk probably wrote sometime in the middle of that 25 year period, because the dreaded Assyrians have already faded from view, and the Babylonians, or Chaldeans, are spoken of as being raised up.

We do not know how old Habakkuk was when he wrote, but if he was a mature man, as we would expect him to have been, he must have spent his childhood in Judah during the reign of the boy-king Josiah.

Josiah was one of the two later Judean kings that the Chronicles considered righteous. Josiah had been crowned at the age of eight, in about 639 BC, and when he was sixteen he began a religious reform that changed the nation's life. The chronicler tells us her in II Chronicles 34,

II Chronicles 34:3-7 For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was still young, he began to seek the God of his father David; and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the wooden images, the carved images, and the molded images. They broke down the altars of the Baals in his presence, and the incense altars which were above them he cut down; and the wooden images, the carved images, and the molded images he broke in pieces, and made dust of them and scattered it on the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. He also burned the bones of the priests on their altars, and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. And so he did in the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, as far as Naphtali and all around, with axes. When he had broken down the altars and the wooden images, had beaten the carved images into powder, and cut down all the incense altars throughout all the land of Israel, he returned to Jerusalem.

In the eighteenth year of his reign Josiah began to repair the Temple, which had been allowed to fall into ruin. In the process of this repair, Hilkiyah the priest found the book of the law of the Lord and had it brought to Josiah. And when it was read, Josiah and those with him were convicted of their sin, a national revival followed, and the observance of the Passover was revived.

This is the time period Habakkuk was growing up in. This was a real reform, but it had to be from the top down. After the death of Josiah, in battle against Pharaoh Neco of Egypt on the plain of Megiddo in 609 BC, disillusionment with the reform set in and Judah reverted to its former evil ways. Jeremiah and Ezekiel describe this age in detail. It continued until the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC.

The most likely date for the book of Habakkuk is in the early part of Jehoiakim's reign, somewhere around 609-597 BC. Jehoiakim was a godless king who led the nation down the path of destruction.

This was a time of transition from one world power to another. Nebuchadnezzar came to power in 605 BC and his first invasion of Judah occurred his first year, when he deported 10,000 of Jerusalem's leaders to Babylon. The nobles who oppressed and extorted from the poor were the first to be carried away, so God's judgment is being carried out.

Since Habakkuk prophesied prior to the Babylonian invasion, the probable date for this book is about 606 BC. Some biblical reference sources suggest as early as 640-615 BC, but the specific date does not really matter, just note that this was a transitional period for the nation of Judah, from Assyrian rule to Babylonian rule. Josiah tried to revive the nation religiously and spiritually, but they rejected it as soon as he was dead.

Now we will get into the age in which Habakkuk lived and wrote, and it is against this background that we must understand the questions the perplexed prophet raised. The first verses describe the period of marked spiritual and moral decay after the brighter period under Josiah.

Habakkuk 1:1-4 The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw. O Lord, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? Even cry out to You, “Violence!” and You will not save. Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife, and contention arises. Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds.

It is interesting that we heard in the commentary that the law does not hold anyone to righteousness, and here he says that “therefore the law is powerless,” and that is the way the nation went and that is the way that this nation is going as well.

It is clearly an anguished cry from a man who loved justice. He had seen justice perverted and had cried out to God against the evil. It is the kind of cry we might have over the deplorable moral decline of America, and even over the physical church in some areas.

Habakkuk must have waited for God’s answer for some time, because he begins his complaint with the words: “How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?” Eventually God did answer, but the answer was an unexpected one which gave Habakkuk new and even greater problems to deal with in his own mind. The Lord replied in verse 5,

Habakkuk 1:5-7 “Look among the nations and watch—be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you. For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful; their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves.”

They were narcissistic to their approach to everything. The verses go on to describe the fierceness of the Babylonian armies and their scorn of all who resist them. Continuing in verse 8 here:

Habakkuk 1:8-11 “Their horses also are swifter than leopards, and more fierce than evening wolves. Their chargers charge ahead; their cavalry comes from afar; they fly as the eagle that hastens to eat. They all come for violence; their faces are set like the east wind. They gather captives like sand. They scoff at kings, and princes are scorned by them. They deride every stronghold, for they heap up earthen mounds and seize it. Then his mind changes, and he transgresses; he commits offense, ascribing this power to his god.”

So up to this point the, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army were taking all of the credit, as we read in his story. But here it is turned around to their false gods and their idols.

No doubt, Habakkuk had expected the Lord to intervene graciously and to send revival like the one in Josiah's day. But when God answered, it was to say that He would send the Babylonian nation to scourge His people. This raised a second dilemma for Habakkuk, which we will treat more carefully in the next chapter.

The first question had been regarding God's inactivity while injustice increased in Judah. God resolved it with His promise of judgment. But then Habakkuk faced a situation in which a pagan nation, Babylon, or the Chaldeans, was going to be used to judge Israel, God's special people.

Habakkuk cries out, "Wait! Wait! Hold on just a minute! I understand why you're judging us. We deserve it. But what I can't understand is how you can use the Babylonians as agents of that judgment. They're even more sinful than we are." Habakkuk's own words are in verse 12.

Habakkuk 1:12-13 Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction [speaking of the people of Judah]. You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?

Habakkuk was working through an interesting dilemma in his mind. Why was God bringing a more evil nation than the nation of Judah upon his own people, a people more righteous than they? The answer to this second question constitutes the heart of the prophecy and leads to verse 4 of Habakkuk 2, the great text that meant so much to the apostle Paul.

Habakkuk 2:4 "Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith."

Habakkuk is the prophet of faith, as he has been labeled by many commentators. The keystone of the whole book is Habakkuk 2:4. His main theme, like Psalm 73 and other Old Testament passages, was the affliction of the godly and the prosperity of the ungodly. He dwells on the perfect dealings of God and the development of faith in God's own people.

God's answer is that He will judge the Babylonians too but that in the meantime His people are to live by faith in Him and His control of history.

This leads to a lament upon all who resist God and practice unrighteousness, which is in the remainder of chapter 2, and to a great prayer of personal faith by Habakkuk in chapter 3. He ends by looking ahead to the coming invasion by the Babylonians, and singing a hymn of faith. We will read verses 17-19 of chapter 3. This is Habakkuk's hymn of faith.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though the flock may be cut off from the fold, and there be no herd in the stalls—yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength; He will make my

feet like deer's feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills. To the Chief Musician.
With my stringed instruments.

So here in the end Habakkuk realized that the only joy and rejoicing he would have was in God and that would become his focus.

Four lessons emerge in the opening exchange between God and His questioning prophet Habakkuk in the first chapter. First, history, regardless of how it seems to us, is under God's control. We see this in God's reply to Habakkuk in verses 5 and 6; God tells him:

Habakkuk 1:5-6 "Look among the nations and watch—be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you. For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling places that are not theirs.

Every nation on earth is under the hand of God, therefore there is no power in this world that is not ultimately controlled by Him. Things are not what they appear to be. It seemed to be the astute military prowess of the Chaldeans that achieved their ascendancy to power. But it was not that at all, because it was God who raised them up. God is the Lord of history.

He is seated in the heavens, and the nations to Him are as grasshoppers, as a drop in a bucket, or as the small dust of the balance. The Bible asserts that God is over all. He started the historical process, He is controlling it, and He is going to end it. We must never lose sight of this crucial fact.

The silence of God in human affairs, then as now, has forever been difficult to understand. But this does not mean that there is not an answer, and that divine wisdom is incapable of coping with the situation. All is under His seeing eye and everything is under the control of His mighty hand.

But in the meantime the law was slack, rendered ineffective or paralyzed. It came to be looked upon as being without force or authority. Because of unrighteous judges the law was immobilized. Sounds like our nation today, where the judges are nullifying the Ten Commandments and removing them from places.

Since the forms of judgment were corrupted, both life and property were insecure. Justice could not prevail because the ungodly knew how to hem the righteous in on all sides, so that he could not receive his just due.

Miscarriage of justice was the order of the day. Ensnaring the righteous by fraud, the ungodly perverted all right and honesty. Because God did not punish sin immediately, men thought they could continue to sin with impunity. This brings to mind verse 11 of Ecclesiastes 8, which says:

Ecclesiastes 8:11 Because the sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.

The second lesson is that history follows a divine plan. The events of history are not accidental, though they may appear to be so at times. They follow God's plan. There is a purpose in history, and what is now happening in this twenty-first century is not accidental.

Remembering that the church is at the center of God's plan, we must never forget the mistakes of the church and how God caused it, or at least allowed it, to degenerate and disintegrate into apostasy. This tendency continues because Satan is alive and viciously trying to destroy the church. But in Matthew 16:18, God says the gates of Hades will never destroy it.

The church became complacent and slipped into Laodiceanism which allowed human reasoning, under the influence of Satan, to subtly erode the high spiritual standards of God's way of life among some of the members of Worldwide Church of God, and since then it has continued to happen.

The church, like the world, has been carelessly sliding into the progressive liberal notion of tolerance of sins such as: immorality, immodesty, and deceitful behavior, which have been made to sound "not that bad," by being downgraded in words to little more than impropriety and improper behavior.

Many of the people who have passed through the church through the years have had an attitude of constantly pushing the envelope of propriety, appropriateness, and decency. They live their lives in the gray areas and beyond. Not quite sinning, but offending the brethren at every turn.

The apostle Paul faced a similar attitudinal problem and addressed it twice in the same letter.

I Corinthians 6:7-8 Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another [Or condemn one another. That law is part of the context and it does mean that, but by extension it does mean to go against one another in any way or condemn one another]. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated? No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren!

I Corinthians 6:9-12 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God [That is a very emphatic statement.]. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God [Could there be a greater blessing given to us than having our sins forgiven, however bad they were?]. All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any.

This is where feelings and emotions will get involved. A person will do something that is not against the law, but it is in one of those gray areas or beyond. Even in the church, some are so busy trying to be accepted by the world that they become as worldly as possible. They "out pagan" the pagans. They live their lives at "death's door." They do what they want just short of flagrant sinning; but are unwise in their thinking and inappropriate in their behaviors, offending the brethren left and right with no care or regard for others.

They will even quote Scripture, usually out of context, to justify the fulfillment of their own desires. As instruments of Satan they are one of the greatest causes of conflict and contention in the church.

I Corinthians 10:21-24 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons [This means that you

cannot have one foot in the church and one foot out the door]. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He? All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful [or expedient]; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify [bring us up spiritually]. Let no one seek his own, but each one the others well-being.

Brethren who go against brethren act contrary to God's plan. History has always followed God's plan. Judgment will come upon those who are contrary.

The third thing is that history follows a divine timetable. This comes out at several places in Habakkuk's prophecy. In chapter 1, God says, "I am going to do something in your days," that is, not before or after, but precisely when He wanted it to happen. In chapter 2 the point is made even stronger. Verse 3 says:

Habakkuk 2:3 For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.

The revelation God gave was for and about a future time. While the immediate application was to the end of the Chaldean/Babylonian captivity, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews, probably Paul, interpreted it to refer also to the return of Jesus Christ.

Led by the Holy Spirit, Paul changed the word "it" to "He" and applied it to Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 10:37-38 "For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him."

Regarding the scoffers Peter wrote about, notice their question in II Peter 3.

II Peter 3:3-4 Knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation."

God's reply in Habakkuk 2:3 is, "Wait for it! It will surely come!" A discouraged Jew in Babylonian exile might ask, "Will the Lord come and deliver us?" and the answer is, "Yes! Wait for Him!" That is what we are doing to this very day. The fulfillment of the message may occur more slowly than expected, but God's timing will be perfect.

God is far from being an unconcerned spectator in earth's affairs. We can always be certain that if our hearts are stirred over the prevalence of sin and ungodliness, God is all the more deeply concerned about how our lives are going and are protected.

Now, fourth, history is bound up with the divine Kingdom. The key to the history of the world is the Kingdom of God. The story of the other nations mentioned in the Old Testament is relevant only as it bears upon the history of God's church. What really matters in the world is God's Kingdom.

With this in mind, we cannot be tripped up when we see surprising things happening in the world. What we should be asking ourselves is, “What’s the relevance of what’s happening today to the Kingdom of God?”

When frustrating or stressful things happen to you, do not complain; just look at it as a challenge to be conquered. Ask yourself, “What is God teaching me through this? What is there in me that needs to be corrected? Where have I gone wrong and why is God allowing these things?” These are some of the things that Habakkuk asked himself during the course of his life.

There is always meaning in them and we have the responsibility of finding out what it is. We should never doubt the love or the justice of God. He sometimes delays His answers in order to deal with selfishness or things in our lives that should not be there.

We should judge every event in the light of God’s great, eternal, and glorious purpose. When we meet current events with that perspective, we are following the advice that Jesus gave His disciples in Matthew 24.

Matthew 24:4-6 And Jesus answered and said to them: “Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, ‘I am the Christ,’ and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.”

Jesus Christ is the Lord of history and He is the God of detailed circumstance. Nothing has ever happened to His people that did not flow in the channel God dug for it. No event has ever flamed up in spite of God or left Him astonished, bewildered, or confused.

The sins of mankind have reduced the world to an arena of passion and fury. That is what the decisions are made out of. That is why we see these idiotic decisions made about transgender and homosexuality and so forth.

Like wild beasts, people tear at each other’s throats, yet in the midst of the history of which Jesus Christ is Lord, each individual who has believed in Him as the Savior and as the Lord of life know the power of His resurrection and learn that events, however terrible, cannot separate us from the love of God.

What could be more comforting than that? First we are forgiven when we repent genuinely, then we are never separated from the love of God as long as we obey Him.

This is the lesson that God taught Habakkuk: God is Lord of history, He controls history, and He accomplishes His purposes in history for those who are His own.

Habakkuk is a profound book, one which delves deeply into the mysteries of God. Not all the Bible’s books are like this. The apostle Paul’s pastoral letters, for example, are quite straightforward in their presentation of truth.

Habakkuk is profound because it raises deep questions about the workings of God in history, why God does what He does, why He does it in the way He does, and why He sometimes seems like He does nothing.

It is also profound because of the answers God gives. He says that although the righteous may not understand everything He is doing in history, they nevertheless should live by faith in Him. Now let us continue on in Habakkuk 1. This addresses the prophet's second question.

Habakkuk 1:12-17 Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction. You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he? Why do You make men like fish of the sea, like creeping things that have no ruler over them? They take up all of them with a hook, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their dragnet. Therefore they rejoice and are glad. Therefore they sacrifice to their net, and burn incense to their dragnet; because by them their share is sumptuous and their food plentiful. Shall they therefore empty their net, and continue to slay nations without pity?

In his distress and perplexity Habakkuk asks God whether this cruelty and idolatry of the Chaldeans will go on without interruption. Will God not bring such greediness to an end by His power? On this tense note chapter 1 concludes, but the answer of God will appear in the next chapter. There we will see that God has set a bound to all who displease Him.

All is taken into account, and the remedy is provided. We do well to bring our doubts and confusions to God, as did Habakkuk, and leave them with Him for final determination and solution. God never fails His people!

Habakkuk 2:1-4 I will stand my watch [Habakkuk speaking here] and set myself on the rampart, and watch to see what He [God] will say to me, and what I will answer when I am corrected. Then the Lord answered me and said: "Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. "Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith.

He knows and accepts that God will correct him, and he knows that God will correct him in a way that is loving.

The statement "The just shall live by his faith" is so important that it is picked up and quoted three times in the New Testament: twice by Paul in Romans 1:17; and once in Galatians 3:11, and once by the author of Hebrews, who was also probably Paul, in Hebrews 10:38.

Habakkuk had a problem. He had lived through a period of national revival followed by a period of spiritual decline, and when he cried out to God about it, God replied that He was sending the Babylonians to be an agent of judgment on His people.

This was not what Habakkuk wanted. He had been looking for another renewal. But in addition to not getting what he wanted, he now had the further problem of reconciling God's actions with what he knew of God's moral standards.

It would be like crying out to God about the poor moral condition of the people in America and hearing that God is going to destroy it by a Muslim invasion. At first we are quite critical of the

failures of the people. We point to lawlessness and immoral standards and even open treason in some places; to lack of self-control and murder of babies.

We ask for a renewing movement of Constitutional rights and are distressed that our prayers have gone unanswered for such a long time. But then, after God has replied that He is going to destroy the nation by an invasion of Muslim terrorists, we find ourselves protesting. “The nation may be in a deplorable state, we argue, but surely it’s not as bad as these Muslim terrorists. Even if it were, it wouldn’t seem right that it’s to be destroyed by such ruthless anti-Christian foreigners.” We might ask at this point, as Habakkuk does,

Habakkuk 1:13 You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?

This is a very contemporary quote and applies directly to our lives today. We encounter this on a personal level too. Suppose you lose your job because a person who “has it in for you” misrepresents something you have done. Why did God allow this terrible person to succeed?

Suppose you are sick and a doctor misdiagnoses your case so that you get worse. Why has this happened? Suppose you experience some great disappointment, the death of a child or spouse, the breakup of a marriage or an engagement. Does God not care? You are not perfect, but why should someone who is not even a Christian have it seemingly good while you lose out?

When we face problems like this it is important that we follow a proper procedure in dealing with them. When things go wrong, some people tend to withdraw. They drop out of Christian activities, stop going to church, pull back into their psychological corner, and pout.

Others repudiate their past. They conclude that they must have been wrong about God and renounce all belief in Him. Both are wrong ways to deal with such problems. So, how should we deal with them? Let me give you four basic ways; the ways that Habakkuk dealt with these kind of problems.

The first point is to stop to think. Most of us have a tendency to talk first and think afterward, if we think at all. But James tells us in James 1:

James 1:19 So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

When we speak first, we often muddle ourselves by fanning the flames of our own unbelief or muddying the water of our ignorance. When we shut up and think, we begin to sort things out and allow the light of God to shine into our situation. Here is some related great advice for everyone.

Proverbs 17:28 Even a fool is counted wise when he holds his peace; when he shuts his lips, he is considered perceptive.

The second point is to restate basic principles. When you start to think you must not begin with your immediate problem. Begin further back. Apply the strategy of the indirect approach. This is the principle of finding sound footing.

Were you ever on a sidewalk in the winter when the snow was cleared off but there were still treacherous icy spots? How did you walk? If you are like most people, you kept your eyes down and placed your feet carefully on safe ground. You must do the same thing spiritually.

Your problem is a slippery spot. Get onto the parts that are firm. Remind yourself of things you know. Then you will find that the problem begins to fall into proper perspective and principles for solving it emerge.

Psalm 17:4-5 Concerning the works of men, by the word of Your lips, I have kept away from the paths of the destroyer. Uphold my steps in Your paths, that my footsteps may not slip.

The third point is to correctly apply the principles to the problem. All problems are capable of solution only if they are put into the right context. The initial way to interpret a difficult text of Scripture is to consider its context.

We often mistake the meaning of a phrase because we take it out of its context, but when you put your problem text into its context, the context will generally interpret the text for you. The same is also true of the particular problem that is causing you concern.

Let me give you an illustration of the effect of considering the context. “Turning a blind eye.” What does that mean to you? It is an idiom describing the ignoring of undesirable information, which I think we all do at times.

The phrase to “turn a blind eye” is attributed to an incident in the life of Admiral Horatio Nelson. Nelson was blinded in one eye early in his Royal Navy career. During the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801 the cautious Admiral Sir Hyde Parker, in overall command of the British forces, sent a signal to Nelson's forces ordering them to discontinue the action. Naval orders were transmitted via a system of signal flags at that time.

When this order was given to the more aggressive Nelson's attention, he lifted his telescope up to his blind eye, said, “I really don't see the signal,” and most of his forces continued to press home the attack. The frigates supporting the line-of-battle ships did break off, in one case suffering severe losses in the retreat.

There is a misconception that the order was to be obeyed at Nelson's discretion, but this is contradicted by the fact that it was a general order to all the attacking ships, some of whom did break off, and that later that day Nelson openly stated that he had “fought contrary to orders.” Sir Hyde Parker was recalled in disgrace and Nelson appointed Commander-in-Chief of the fleet following the battle.

He turned a blind eye and by the world was rewarded by it, but he went against the authority that was over him at the time.

The fourth point is that if still in doubt, commit the problem to God in faith. I do not mean that you go to God last, I mean that you should be working on it continuously and if you are still in doubt, commit it to God in faith. This is the most important way of all.

Suppose you have stopped to think. Suppose you have gone back to basic principles. Suppose you have tried to correctly apply these to the specific problem that is confronting you. What should you do if you are still as puzzled as you were at the beginning? Should you give up? Should you go back to withdrawing or repudiating what you had professed before? Of course not.

At this point you must leave the matter with God. In other words, you must say, “Father, I’ve done everything I know to do with this problem. I have faced it on the basis of everything I know, and I still do not understand it. Please allow me to leave the issue and my worry with You. I’ll still do my part to watch for the answer from You.”

God wants you to include Him in your attempt to solve your problem. He wants you to grow spiritually, not by trying to force Him do all the work, but by Him giving you His strength to overcome the challenge. He wants you to grow in faith and your knowledge of Him will deepen.

Faith without works is a dead faith. So if you do your part and take responsibility for your actions and seek diligently to resolve the cause of the problem in God’s time frame, not in yours, God will give you a proper answer and solution to the problem you are facing according to His schedule.

This is the biblical method of dealing with problems you do not seem able to cope with on the basis of your limited experience, but we should not worry and never give up. This is what we should do to solve personal problems and that is what Habakkuk did when confronted by God’s prophesy of a Babylonian invasion.

First, Habakkuk stopped to think. He did not write much, but he thought deeply. He wrestled through his problems and thought about them deeply before writing anything. We know because of what he has written down.

Second, he reminded himself of first principles; and third, he correctly applied the principles by putting things in the right context. What principles were they? As we read Habakkuk 1:12 and the following verses, we find that they are the most basic of all theological principles, namely, the attributes of God.

He names four attributes of God: Everlasting; Holy; Sovereign; and Faithful. Habakkuk begins with the statement, “O Lord, are you not from everlasting?” We can imagine his train of thought.

In the previous two verses God had been talking about the Babylonians He was going to send to invade Israel, and He had said in verses 10-11 of Habakkuk 1,

Habakkuk 1:10-11 They scoff at kings, and princes are scorned by them. They deride every stronghold, for they heap up earthen mounds and seize it. Then his mind changes, and he transgresses; he commits offense, ascribing this power to his god.”

Habakkuk must have reflected on the nature of this god(s) of the Babylonians. He must have asked himself, “Who is this ‘god’ anyway? The ‘god’ of the Babylonians is only an idol; he is nothing at all. He is even less of a reality than the Babylonians.”

Then he must have compared it to the God of Israel, YHVH, whose name begins verse 12 and who is an “everlasting” God.

Habakkuk 1:12 Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction.

He must have reminded himself that YHVH was before anything came into existence and would be long after Babylon faded away. Even if Habakkuk could not understand all that God did, he found comfort in knowing that he served the *everlasting* God.

His second sentence refers to another of God's attributes: holiness. Habakkuk says in verse 12 again, "My God, my Holy One, we will not die."

This is a most important characteristic of God. In the Bible it is the attribute stressed more than any other. We do not find the Bible speaking often of God's "sovereign name," "loving name," or "wise name," but again and again God reminds us of His "holy name." It is the only attribute repeated three times: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty," in Isaiah 6:3 and in Revelation 4:8.

This attribute of God is also of special importance for the matter Habakkuk is raising. Habakkuk asks, "Is it right for God to allow the wicked to destroy those more righteous than themselves?" He is really asking, "Does God act rightly?" In the context of this set of questions it was important for Habakkuk to remind himself that God is the Holy One.

Habakkuk also refers to God's sovereignty. Verse 12 goes on to say: "O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction."

God controls history. The Babylonians did not simply rise up on their own. God raised them up. Furthermore, God was raising them up when He wanted, and He allowed them to operate in the precise geographical sphere He wanted.

This is something David would have understood immediately, because in his prayer at the dedication of the goods collected for the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, he prayed as recorded in I Chronicles 29.

I Chronicles 29:11-12 Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power and the glory, the victory and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours; yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and You are exalted as head over all. Both riches and honor come from You, and You reign over all. In Your hand is power and might; in Your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all.

The last attribute of God that Habakkuk mentions in verse 12 is *faithfulness*. He expresses it by saying that God is a place of security for His people. We will read it again here.

Habakkuk 1:12 Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, You have appointed them for judgment; O Rock, You have marked them for correction.

Habakkuk calls him His Rock. A rock provides firm footing. It is a foundation on which a person can build a secure dwelling. It is often a fortress to which a soldier can run and be safe. God is all these things to us spiritually and physically.

The personal relationship of Habakkuk to God is stressed repeatedly: “My God, my Holy One.” What did Habakkuk do once he had reminded himself of these great attributes of God?

He had stopped to think. Then, he had restated his basic principles. Next, he took the third step and applied these basic principles to his problems.

His reasoning must have been along these lines: If God is the everlasting God, if He was here before anything we know came into existence and will be here after all our problems and enemies have faded away, then the Babylonian invasion is not God’s last word, however final that invasion may seem.

God’s relationship to us is more important and more lasting. Again, if God is holy, as we know Him to be, then the outcome of this invasion, since it is being caused by God, will not be evil but good in the final analysis.

Ultimately, it will accomplish some good purpose. If God is sovereign, then the invasion is not the result of mere chance. God is still in control and on His throne! Finally, if God is faithful, then the victory of the Babylonian armies must be for the good of God’s people. It does not indicate that God has changed His mind. He has not abandoned us. We are still His people.

Now think about what Habakkuk has accomplished by this reasoning. If the Babylonian invasion is not the last word in God’s relationship to His people, if it is not to be evil in the final analysis, if it is not the result of mere chance, if it does not indicate a change of mind on God’s part, then what must the invasion be? The answer is, it must be a tool in God’s hand for the correction and purification of His people.

Habakkuk expresses his conclusion of this section by saying—“O Lord, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have marked them for correction.”

What we have here is an answer to the first half of Habakkuk’s problem. He has stopped to think; he has restated basic principles; he has applied them to his problem; and he has arrived at the answer: the invasion must be a tool in God’s hand for the correction and purification of His people. This principle right here can also be applied to the breakup of the Worldwide Church of God.

But Habakkuk is not yet satisfied. He can see the ultimate purpose of the coming invasion, but he is still troubled by the moral dimensions of using the Babylonians, an ungodly people, to punish Israel. Israel is far from righteous, but the Babylonians are even less righteous. They are actually terribly wicked.

Habakkuk struggles with the question: Is it not wrong for God to exalt such a wicked people? Is this not an endorsement of evil? At this point Habakkuk seems to be doing exactly what he did with the first half of his problem. Once again he stops to think, restates his principles, and then applies them to the problem. Then, continuing in in verse 13:

Habakkuk 1:13 You [God] are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he?

But this time the procedure does not work because the difficult questions with which he struggles is bound up with the principles. It is precisely because God is too pure to look on evil and cannot tolerate wrong that the problem of God's using the Babylonians as a tool arises in Habakkuk's mind. What is Habakkuk to do now? He still does not have the complete answer.

At this point he comes to step four and does what was mentioned in the summary of these points earlier, he commits the problem to God in faith. That is, he leaves it with Him. That is how he begins chapter 2 of his book.

Habakkuk 2:1 I will stand my watch and set myself on the rampart, and watch to see what He will say to me, and what I will answer when I am corrected.

Habakkuk has gone as far in his reasoning as he can. Now he needs to know more if he is to make progress. So, he waits for that instruction. He says that he is going to wait to see what God will say to him. This is worth looking at in detail, because it answers the questions: How do we leave a problem with God? And what should our frame of mind be?

Let us briefly look at three things we should do but still keep watch for God's intervention and solution.

First, we should detach ourselves from the problem. Habakkuk suggests this when he says he will go to the ramparts, or a watchtower.

A watchtower was often built in a grain field or vineyard to provide a place for a guard to keep an eye on the harvest. It could also be a tower in the city or on the walls of the city from which a watchman could keep a sharp eye out for an enemy.

Since Habakkuk mentions "ramparts" in some translations in this verse, he is probably thinking of the second kind of watchtower. But in either case the idea is the same. A tower is something set apart from or detached from the common pressures of life. Often, what we need to do is step back and view the problem from a distance, from a different perspective.

So, when Habakkuk says that he is going to stand at his watch and station himself on the ramparts, he is saying, "I've been down in the valley with my problem and haven't been able to solve it. Now I'm going to draw apart for a while and leave it with God and I'm going to detach myself from the difficulty."

This is one of the most common areas where we go astray, believe it or not. Sometimes we do not quite know what to do about a problem. It may be a problem with some situation that is confronting us which involves a difficult decision. Having failed to reach a solution, despite seeking advice from others, we take it to God in prayer.

But what so frequently happens is this. We go down on our knees and tell God about the thing that is worrying us; we tell Him that we cannot solve the difficulty ourselves, that we cannot understand; and we ask Him to deal with it to show us His way. Then the moment we get up from our knees, we begin to worry about the problem again.

If we are continuing to worry about it, we have not left the problem with God. If you have a problem like this, leave it with God. Leaving it with God does not mean doing nothing further to help solve the situation. God wants problem solvers in His Kingdom, not slackers. We will read James 26 because it helps us understand the faith aspect of this.

James 2:17-26 (AMP) So too, faith, if it does not have works [to back it up], is by itself dead [inoperative and ineffective]. But someone may say, “You [claim to] have faith and I have [good] works; show me your [alleged] faith without the works [if you can], and I will show you my faith by my works [that is, by what I do].” You believe [that] God is one; you do well [to believe that]. The demons also believe [that], and shudder and bristle [in awe-filled terror—they have seen His wrath]! But are you willing to recognize, you foolish [spiritually shallow] person, that faith without [good] works is useless? Was our father Abraham not [shown to be] justified by works [of obedience which expressed his faith] when he offered Isaac his son on the altar [as a sacrifice to God]? You see that [his] faith was working together with his works, and as a result of the works, his faith was completed [reaching its maturity when he expressed his faith through obedience]. And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and this [faith] was credited to him [by God] as righteousness and as conformity to His will,” and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man (believer) is justified by works and not by faith alone [that is, by acts of obedience a born-again believer reveals his faith]. In the same way, was Rahab the prostitute not justified by works too, when she received the [Hebrew] spies as guests and protected them, and sent them away [to escape] by a different route? For just as the [human] body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works [of obedience] is also dead.

We will analyze faith in more detail in my next sermon, but that gives you a clear picture of the failure of “faith without works.”

Second, we should expect God’s answer. Just because we have left something with God and have ceased worrying about it does not mean that we should forget about it entirely. Here again Habakkuk’s image of the watchtower is helpful.

The tower is detached from the crowds of people below, but the person who enters it does so in order to keep an eye on the landscape. In a sense, he is on duty. He has work to do, and that work is to watch to see what will happen. Habakkuk says that he “will stand at his watch and look to see” what God will say to him.

Now how do we look for God’s answer? How does God speak? The primary way is through Scripture. Sometimes God directs us by what we might call “intimations,” deep personal feelings concerning the way we should go. Sometimes they are stronger feelings called compulsions.

He frequently directs us by what we call open or closed doors. That is, God provides an opportunity for service or takes it away. These things occasionally enter in. Still, the primary, and ultimately the only fully reliable way of knowing God’s direction or answer to our perplexities, is through Scripture.

Anyone who has made a habit of reading the Word of God regularly knows how that happens. We have a problem, have been unable to solve it, and have left it with God. It may be that we have even forgotten about it temporarily. But one day we are reading a passage of the Bible and suddenly a verse leaps out at us and we recognize at once that it contains the solution to what has troubled us.

It is God's answer to the problem we previously left with Him. This is something that happens almost daily if you are reading and studying your Bible every day.

Third, is that we should be persistent in our expectation. Habakkuk also implies this by the use of his image. He says that he is going to stay in his watchtower until God answers his question. God likes that kind of tenacity, resolve, and persistence. God honors and responds to the humble persevering attitude.

God honored it in the case of Habakkuk, because the entire second chapter is God's answer, expressed in a series of judgments upon those who are not upright and who do not live by faith in the true God.

The answer, which we are going to look at in the next chapter, is this: God says,

"I've heard your prayer, Habakkuk, and I understand perfectly what's bothering you. Here's My answer. It's true that I've raised up the Babylonians to punish My people, but this doesn't mean that I'm endorsing their evil or sin. On the contrary, I will judge them in due course. I've raised them up; I will bring them down again. They will suffer the full outpouring of My wrath. Meanwhile My people will be purified of their sin and restored to My favor."

"And while this is happening, the one who is truly righteous must live by faith in Me. Write this down. Make it plain, so that anyone who reads it may live by it."

This was what Habakkuk did. He wrote it down in his prophecy. We are called to read it and live by faith in our great God.

That "the just shall live by his faith" is the issue we will analyze in my next sermon on the book of Habakkuk.