

## *“Open Your Eyes!”*

Text: Habakkuk 1:5-11

Series: Book of Habakkuk [#2]

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### **Introduction**

Last Sunday we looked at the opening verses of Habakkuk and his question “Where are You, God?” King Josiah had led Judah back to God, but after he died, the people once again turned away from God to their sinful ways. Habakkuk was troubled, distressed, and he cried out to God,

- “Why don’t You answer my prayers?”
- “Why do You allow sin to dominate everywhere?”
- “Why do You allow justice to take a beating?”

We entered into those questions with him, and felt the distress of his and our own questions and problems, the desperation of God being silent.

Today we come to verse 5, and God’s first words after the long silence,

“Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days—you would not believe if you were told.”

The verbs are plural. God is speaking to Habakkuk and to the people of Judah. We begin with...

### **God’s Personal Message To Habakkuk.**

As we consider God’s first message to the prophet, we need to note what He says to him both explicitly and implicitly. First, God lets Habakkuk know that he should not confuse His silence with a lack of caring. Yes, Habakkuk knew God’s promises. But in this desperate silence with evil prevailing, he needed reassurance.

God has woven a beautiful thread of love, comfort and hope throughout the fabric of warning and judgment in the Old Testament prophets. For example, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C. prophet Joel,

“...Now return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil.” (2:13)

In Isaiah, who lived through the fall of the Northern Kingdom a century before Habakkuk, God used beautiful picture language about the coming Messiah.

“Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes.” (40:11)

Again, in chapter 49,

“Shout for joy, O heavens! And rejoice, O earth! Break forth into joyful shouting, O mountains! For the LORD has comforted His people and will have compassion on His afflicted. But Zion said, ‘The LORD has forsaken me, and the Lord has forgotten me.’ ‘Can a woman forget her nursing child and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you. Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands; your walls are continually before Me.’” (49:13-16)

And God sums it up in 54:8, “... with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you.” Consider one more example, from Habakkuk’s contemporary, Jeremiah, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness.” (31:3)

But Habakkuk needed reassurance. We need reassurance in our long dark nights of silence. Just as God told Habakkuk that He was already at work, that the prophet should look around and see the evidence, He tells us to do the same thing.

Negatively: *Don’t confuse silence with lack of caring.*

Positively: Go to God’s word that states His never wavering, never changing care for you. Remember God’s words from the prophets. Remember God’s word through Peter, telling us to give all our worries and cares to Him, because He *cares* about us (*cf.* 1 Peter 5:7). Look around you for the evidence that is there, even in the darkest nights.

Secondly, God told the prophet not to confuse His silence with inactivity or inability. When we don’t hear from God, when we don’t see Him working, we can cry out, “God, why aren’t You doing something about this?” We might even wonder, if only for a brief moment, if God really can take care of this.

God told Habakkuk, “I am doing something...” And, in verse 6, “I am raising up the Chaldeans...” “Habakkuk,” God says, “I am not taking a nap, nor am I sitting idly by. This situation is not beyond My ability. After all, I am the One who brought everything into existence by simply speaking a word. I am the One who holds it all together. Habakkuk, I am the active, all-powerful Sovereign!”

When we watch and wait for God to answer as evil devastates and dominates, as people we love continue to reject Jesus, as problems and sickness compound and death strikes, God says to us, “*Don’t confuse silence with inactivity or inability.*” He tells us, “You do not see, nor do you or can you understand all that I am doing. Know that I am always active in your life and world with My unlimited power, even when you don’t see Me, even when you don’t hear Me.”

As well, God told Habakkuk, “Don’t expect Me to conform to your expectations.” As Habakkuk was pained and troubled by the sin dominating throughout Judah, as he was puzzled and distressed by God’s silence, I am sure he pictured what he wanted God to do, what he thought God should do. Above all, he wanted his people to return to God, to live holy lives and so see righteousness and justice flowing throughout the land. He also, I am sure, wanted to see God’s judgment on those who in effect thumbed their noses at God.

But God said, “Look around! When you see what I am doing you will be astonished! You will be astounded! You won’t believe it! You couldn’t have imagined that I am rearranging the power structure of this part of the world to deal with your concerns. Habakkuk, not only do I care about the condition of My people, not only am I active in doing something, but I am doing what I desire in My way and time. You see, Habakkuk, My thoughts are not your thoughts. Your ways are not My ways. Indeed, My ways and thoughts are higher than yours, just as the heavens are higher than the earth” (cf. Isaiah 55:8-9).

When God is silent, when it appears that He is not doing anything about my concern, I need to keep going to Him, to keep trusting Him. And, while I plead for what I want Him to do, I also need to recognize that while God responds to and grants my requests, He will do what He desires in His way and time.

When we pray in accordance with God’s will, unselfishly, in faith, with pure hearts, with right relationships, God will astonish and astound us, He will do things we would not believe if we were told ahead of time. And, although I often think I know what is best, really, only God knows that. How many times have we looked back and been thankful that God did not give us some things for which we pleaded. Why not always trust God and His will since it is, as Paul tells us, “good and acceptable and perfect”? (Romans 12:2). *Don’t expect God to conform to your expectations.*

Finally, God told Habakkuk, “Don’t lose sight of the forest because of the trees.” What I am talking about here, of course, is perspective. It’s easy to not have a clear, accurate perspective in one way or another.

The story is told of a group of Presbyterian pastors attending a conference in Scotland at a beautiful private conference center. They went out for a walk to enjoy the scenery. They were so enthralled with what they saw that when they came to a temporary bridge over a stream they didn’t see a sign that said the bridge was not safe.

As they started across that bridge, one of the center’s grounds people saw them and shouted, “You can’t cross the bridge! You can’t cross the bridge!” One of the pastors shouted back, “It’s alright. We’re pastors at the Presbyterian conference here on the grounds.” The groundsman answered, “I don’t care about that, but if you don’t get off that bridge, you’ll all be Baptists!”

They, we would say, lost sight of the *trees* because of the *forest*. They lost sight of an important detail because they were only looking at the big picture.

On the other side of the coin there is what we see here in Habakkuk, losing sight of the forest because of the trees. Losing sight of the big picture by being enmeshed in the details. God told Habakkuk, “Look among the nations! Observe!” The prophet had been so concerned about what was going on in Judah that he had not seen the stirring of God in the power structure of that part of the world.

Now, we should not be too hard on Habakkuk here. He was sensitive to God’s holiness and righteousness. He was deeply troubled at the evil permeating Judah. He had to see it day after day—he couldn’t escape it. He prayed constantly about it, he longed for revival or judgment, for God to move and bring the people back to faith and faithfulness. He was looking at *the trees* in Judah, but not *the forest* beyond its borders.

We’ve been there, haven’t we? Perhaps many times. I remember an evening, when I was in college, scrambling to put the last details in place for a church College & Career function. One of the newer people in the group came up and began talking with me. I managed to get out a few one or two-word replies while I continued thinking through my list of things that still needed to be done.

*Until* ... it finally hit me. This gal was awkwardly and excitedly trying to tell me that our prayers for her had been answered. One of the Christian gals in the group had led her to Christ the day before. Thankfully, God tore off my blinders, let me see the big picture, and then the whole group celebrated.

At times we, like Habakkuk, get so enmeshed with our own concerns or problems that we don’t see what God is doing around us. A clear, accurate perspective keeps that difficult, delicate balance of *the trees* and *the forest*.

As I said earlier, God’s message here was both to Habakkuk and to the nation of Judah. Let’s now turn our attention to ...

### **God’s Judicial Message To Judah.**

The major part of God’s message here is that judgment is coming on Judah’s sin. Habakkuk had prayed and pleaded. God now answered. However,

- God did not bring a revival, but judgment.
- God did not raise up a strong leader from within Judah to execute His judgment, but a foreign, ruthless nation.
- God did not send the Messiah to save, but Nebuchadnezzar to destroy.

God not only tells Judah that the Babylonians are coming, He paints a picture of what they are like. Verse 6, they are “fierce and impetuous.” The word impetuous here can describe moving quickly and efficiently. The Babylonians were fierce fighters who quickly and efficiently defeated their foes. And they covered as much territory as they could, never tiring as they defeated and destroyed city after city, nation after nation.

They are, verse 7 tells us, “dreaded and feared.” And why not? Moving quickly, moving ruthlessly, they struck fear into the hearts of the people, the armies and the kings in their path, much like the Blitzkrieg in the early part of WWII. They were arrogant, not recognizing any authority or standards of justice but their own. They were a law unto themselves.

The Chaldean armies were swift and hungry for victory. Verse 8 describes them as “swifter than leopards.” And, as “keener than wolves in the evening.” That is, they were like hungry wolves after hunting all day without success. Changing images, they galloped in and, changing the image once again, they swept down like eagles to snatch their prey.

They were violent. Verse 9. “All of them come for violence. Their horde of faces moves forward. They collect captives like sand.” The extreme violence of the Babylonians is documented by historians. After conquering a city they sometimes beheaded people and made pyramids of the heads to mark their path. They would impale, skin and burn men alive. They would cut off hands, feet, ears or noses of men and send their women and children into slavery. After conquering and looting a city, they sometimes burned it and destroyed any forest or other things of value that could be used to reestablish it.

The last half of the verse is difficult and has a term that no one has really been able to translate. But the sense of a “horde of faces” moving forward like a strong, blistering east wind may well be the picture. They piled up captives much like bulldozers create huge stockpiles of sand.

And so, by now verse 10 is no surprise, “They mock at kings and rulers are a laughing matter to them. They laugh at every fortress and heap up rubble to capture it.” Verse 11 (a), “Then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on.” They come, conquer, and then move on.

“Yes, Habakkuk, yes, Judah, judgment is coming.” Why did God give the people these details? Why didn’t He just say, “My judgment is coming. I am raising up and sending the Chaldeans to be My instrument of judgment.” He doesn’t give reasons and so we need to be careful in drawing inferences and speculating, but it appears to me that God is saying, “Sin is serious. Ignoring my mercy and calls to repent is serious. Judgment on sin is never a *pleasant* thing.” It may also have been another call to individuals to repent. The nation would be judged, but people could still return to God.

So Habakkuk and the people would understand that His holiness and justice are universal, unchanging standards, God went on to tell them that judgment is also coming on Judah’s agent of judgment, the Babylonians. Drop down to the middle of verse 11, “... But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god.”

God said He would judge the Babylonians, and He did. Daniel chapter 3 records Nebuchadnezzar’s arrogance, God’s saving Daniel’s three friends from the furnace, and the king’s subsequent praise to God.

Chapter 4 moved on to a vision Nebuchadnezzar's saw, Daniel's interpretation of it, and its fulfillment when Nebuchadnezzar, in a time of reflection, self-admiration and arrogance, was struck by God with a condition where he thought and acted like an animal for seven years. The king's final words recorded in Daniel after he had recovered were words of praise to God.

Then Daniel chapter 5 tells us that later Babylon's last king, Belshazzar, saw the fingers of a man's hand writing a message on a wall during a grand feast where they using the gold and silver vessels Nebuchadnezzar's forces had taken from the temple in Jerusalem. Daniel interpreted this indecipherable inscription. It was a message from God:

“God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it. You have been weighed on the scales and found deficient. Your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians.”

(*cf.* Daniel 5:25-28)

And that is exactly what happened later, on October 12, 539 B.C. Yes, God used the Babylonians to judge Judah for its sin. And, yes, God judged Babylon for its sin.

### **Conclusion.**

God has broken the silence. As He told Habakkuk to open his eyes, He revealed not only facts, but valuable lessons for the prophet and everyone in difficult, troubling times.

- Don't confuse silence with lack of caring.
- Don't confuse silence with inactivity or inability.
- Don't expect God to conform to your expectations.
- Don't lose sight of the forest because of the trees.

God also confirmed that He is holy and just, even when we wonder how that can be with things that are unfair, with evil and sin everywhere. Judah would be judged soon for its sin. Babylon would also be judged for its sin.

These were important steps for Habakkuk as he integrated the facts he knew about God through the feelings of his own situation and relationship with God. He now could make more progress. But, as we might conclude and will see next time, there were more questions, more to work through as he tried to better understand and live with confident faith.

As you reflect on this with God now,

- Ask Him to open your eyes to truth He has for you today in your situation.
- Ask Him to help you, not confuse silence for His lack of caring, inactivity or inability. Not to expect Him to conform to your expectations. And not to lose sight of the forest because of the trees— but to have a clear and accurate perspective.

- Begin to explore again the certainty of God's judgment on all sin and all sinners and how that should effect how you live and reach out to people who do not know Jesus, people who, if they die without knowing Him and His forgiveness, will forever receive God's righteous judgment on their sin.

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