

God Answers a Confused Prophet

Summary and Goal

Habakkuk is a remarkable book that records the dialogue between a confused yet trusting prophet and his God. Habakkuk ministered to Judah in a time when evil thrived. The flourishing evil both surrounding and within Judah led him to ask candid questions that the suffering people of his day were asking: Why do the wicked prosper? Why does God not answer the prayers of the righteous? How can God remain strangely silent? In this session, we will see the Lord responded to Habakkuk's questions by reminding the prophet of His power and authority over all things. The overarching truth of the book is that God's people can live with faith and joy even during challenging and confusing times.

Session Outline

1. God's authority over injustice enables His people to live with patience (Hab. 1:2-6).
2. God's authority over evil enables His people to live by faith (Hab. 1:12-13; 2:3-4).
3. God's authority over difficulties enables His people to live with joy (Hab. 3:16-19).

Background Passage: Habakkuk

Session in a Sentence

God has authority over everything, which allows His people to live with faith and joy.

Christ Connection

Habakkuk lived in a time when evil seemed to be everywhere. By faith, he trusted God's promise that God would deliver His people. Injustice, violence, and wickedness surround us today, but we can live by faith and trust that Jesus will return one day to make all things right.

Missional Application

Because we have received forgiveness and life through the greatest evil ever—the crucifixion of Christ—we live with faith and joy through the injustices and evil we experience, showing the world the reality of our hope in Jesus.

Group Time

GROUP MEMBER CONTENT

Introduction

SAY: The Boston Marathon has been held every year since 1897, making it the world’s oldest annual marathon. What began as a race including fifteen men, ten of whom finished, has mushroomed into an international event attracting around thirty thousand participants on average.¹

EXPLAIN: Use the paragraph in the DDG (p. 103) to recall the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013 and the “Boston Strong” slogan the helped to provide comfort for the city.

When we think of the Boston Marathon today, unfortunately the terrible events that occurred during the 2013 race quickly come to mind. Two homemade bombs were detonated near the finish line of the race, killing three people and injuring two hundred and sixty-five others. Boston law enforcement organized an unprecedented manhunt to capture the two brothers responsible for the bombing. Four days later, the search came to an end with one suspect dead and the other in custody. In response to the bombing, the citizens of Boston rallied around the slogan “Boston Strong,” which proved to be a powerful mantra of solidarity and comfort for the city.²

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



Why do you think the phrase “Boston Strong” helped to bring comfort to the city of Boston? (it projected strength in the face of disaster; it gave a rallying cry for the city as a whole, reminding people that they were not alone; it communicated that justice would triumph over evil)

SUMMARIZE: The Book of Habakkuk opens with a prophet grappling with God. Seeing injustice all around him, Habakkuk struggled to understand why God would delay his judgment on wicked Judah. No doubt Habakkuk loved the people of God and longed to see them spiritually restored. Yet he questioned why God would allow His people to sin without consequence. Then, after God declared His coming judgment, Habakkuk again questioned God, this time on His method of judgment. God’s message to Habakkuk is a message we need to hear today with all the injustice in our world. God has authority over all things, and even though events may be confusing to us, we can live with faith and joy as we place our trust in God.

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Point 1: God's authority over injustice enables His people to live with patience (Hab. 1:2-6).

READ Habakkuk 1:2-4 (DDG p. 104).

² O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? ³ 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. ⁴ So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

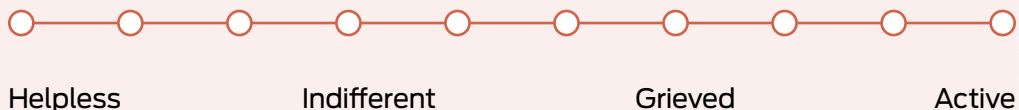
EXPLAIN: Provide the setting for Habakkuk’s ministry: a time of political and spiritual corruption. Then use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 104) to explain what Habakkuk got right and wrong in this passage.

- Habakkuk’s ministry occurred at the end of the seventh century, in the waning years of Judah. He was a contemporary of Nahum, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah.
- He likely ministered during the reign of Jehoiakim, barely a decade removed from the spiritual revival Judah experienced under Jehoiakim’s father, King Josiah. Unlike his father, Jehoiakim was politically and spiritually corrupt; he rejected the spiritual reforms his father had made. The dishonesty and injustice that thrived during Jehoiakim’s reign provided the historical backdrop for Habakkuk’s dialogue with God.

The Book of Habakkuk’s opening verses record the prophet’s impassioned plea to God. Habakkuk saw violence and injustice all around and wondered how God could tolerate such evil behavior from Judah. Sin grieved the heart of Habakkuk because sin should always grieve the hearts of God’s people. “How long?” he asked. Habakkuk asked God hard honest questions, the kind we still ask today. The prophet was justified in his frustration as he witnessed firsthand the reality that life isn’t fair, but he wrongly interpreted God’s silence as either indifference or as a license for Judah to keep sinning.

INSTRUCT: Ask group members to consider their own thoughts about God’s response to sin and injustice in the world with the scale in their DDG (p. 104). Encourage honesty, and allow volunteers to share their thoughts.

Looking at the state of the world, where are you tempted to place God’s response to sin and injustice on this scale?



SAY: Habakkuk longed for God to deal justly with the injustice in Judah, and he desired to see revival return to Judah as it had come during the days of King Josiah. Yet he struggled to trust God’s timing in these matters. We all must wait patiently on God’s timing and trust that sometimes God hides from us what He is doing so we can learn to walk by faith and not by sight.

READ Habakkuk 1:5-6 (DDG p. 104), noting that these were God’s words in response to Habakkuk.

⁵ “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. ⁶ 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.

EXPLAIN: Reference the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 104) as you highlight the shock of God’s plan to Habakkuk.

The Lord was not disturbed by Habakkuk’s sincere questions because they were motivated by a righteous indignation. Yet the Lord responded to the prophet’s appeals in a way that both *comforted* and *confused* Habakkuk. God was raising up a powerful, pagan people to punish Judah: the Chaldeans, also known as the Babylonians.

- Habakkuk would be *comforted* to know God was concerned, engaged, and had a plan for addressing the injustices in Judah.
 - Habakkuk would be *confused* because God would use a nation even more evil than Judah to carry out His justice against Judah. God Himself described the Chaldeans as guilty, and their god was their own strength (1:5-11).
 - Habakkuk needed to learn to trust God’s authority over injustice and that He is always active and good in His purposes, even when they don’t make sense to us. God had a plan in place, but it certainly wasn’t the plan that Habakkuk would have scripted himself because God’s thoughts and ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9).
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INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



What are some examples in Scripture and in your experience of God working in unexpected ways to accomplish His good purposes?
(sending the flood to judge the earth; Job’s suffering; Joseph’s betrayal by his brothers; the death of the firstborn to begin the exodus; handing the people over to enemies during the time of the judges; anointing David as king over Israel; the Assyrians conquering Israel; Jesus died on the cross to save sinners by faith; persecution against the church)

Point 2: God's authority over evil enables His people to live by faith (Hab. 1:12-13; 2:3-4).

READ Habakkuk 1:12-13 (DDG p. 105).

¹² Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. ¹³ You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

EXPLAIN: Use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 105) to summarize the conditions that led to Habakkuk's confusion: God's holiness and the Chaldeans' wickedness, especially when compared to Judah's own wickedness. Then explain how God's actions here were consistent with His character displayed at the cross of Christ.

Habakkuk wrestled with understanding how God could have dealings with the sinful Chaldeans. How could God's perfect character be reconciled with this prophecy? But Habakkuk was misguided in believing God's character would not allow Him to use enemy nations to discipline His people. Employing the Babylonians to discipline Judah was consistent with God's historical actions and His flawless, holy character.

- The Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians in 722 BC (2 Kings 17). This too was the Lord's discipline of His people by means of a pagan nation, one which would eventually fall to the Babylonians.
- In love, God sent Jesus to die on a cross for the salvation of the world. But this plan also involved the wickedness of the people who falsely accused and crucified the perfect Son of God (Acts 2:22-23).

FILL IN THE BLANKS: Provide group members with the answers for the call-out in their DDG (p. 105).

The Problem of Evil: Given what we know about God's **character** and **purposes**, Christians can rest assured that even in the midst of evil, God is working all things for our good (Rom. 8:28).

Essential Doctrine "The Problem of Evil": Many atheists have argued that if God is all-powerful, all-loving, and knows everything, then evil would not exist in the world as humans know it today. But because evil exists in the world, God must not exist (or if He does exist, then He is not good or all-powerful). Despite its powerful rhetoric, appealing to evil as an argument against God fails: first, because outrage over bad things in this world presupposes a "good" moral standard that does not exist apart from God, and second, because God could have a good reason (though unknown to us) for allowing evil and suffering to continue for a season. Given what we know about God's **character** and **purposes**, Christians can rest assured that even in the midst of evil, God is working all things for our good (Rom. 8:28).

READ Habakkuk 2:3-4 (DDG p. 105), again noting these are God’s words in response to Habakkuk.

³ For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay. ⁴ Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 105) to contrast the outcomes for those who live in pride (death and judgment) and those who *live by faith* (life and salvation). Highlight the difficulty of *living by faith* in God’s authority and goodness but also its connection to salvation in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In response to Habakkuk, God described a stark contrast between the Chaldeans and the righteous. The Lord declared the Babylonians—and all the wicked, even among Judah—to be full of pride and lacking integrity. Babylon was a rising power, but their reign would be short-lived (2:6-20). Death and judgment await all who reject the Lord. The righteous one, however, will *live by faith*. God exhorted His prophet to trust Him during these darkest of days and he would live, just as those who believe the gospel receive eternal life in Christ.

- Living by faith requires patience, which is especially challenging when you don’t know how long you will have to live by faith. Consider the difficulty of living by faith when faced with infertility, a difficult pregnancy, ongoing sickness, poverty, injustice, or persecution. God knows this is not easy for us, so He repeatedly reminds us of this truth throughout the Bible: “The righteous will *live by faith*.”
 - The exhortation to *live by faith* is echoed in the New Testament as Paul reminded the Christians in Rome of Christ’s saving power (Rom. 1:16-17; see also Gal. 3:11; Heb. 10:37-39).
 - The impact of *living by faith*:
 - Faith is the key to not giving up in times of unanswered prayer.
 - Faith is the key to triumphantly enduring suffering and oppression.
 - Faith is the key to a correct view of history.
 - Faith is the key to the problem of sin and the apparent triumph of evil.
 - Faith is the key to sanity in the midst of adversity.³
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INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.



What does it mean to “live by faith”? (to trust that God is in control over all things; to believe that God is good and for His people, not against them; to live in humility and obedience to God; trusting God’s Word is true when the circumstances of life try to convince you otherwise)

Point 3: God's authority over difficulties enables His people to live with joy (Hab. 3:16-19).

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Habakkuk 3:16-19 (DDG p. 106).

¹⁶ I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. ¹⁷ Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, ¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. ¹⁹ GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.

EXPLAIN: Consider using the *illustration* below to raise the issue of fear in a way that might connect with the viewing habits of some in your group. Then use the first paragraph in the DDG (p. 106) to note that fear is a real thing, but there are different kinds of fear.

Illustration: The television show *Man vs. Wild* requires a person to face fear. The show captures the adventures of Bear Grylls, a former British soldier who travels the world in search of challenges for his survival skills. Grylls takes his viewers into the most dangerous of settings to demonstrate how to survive scorching deserts, treacherous mountains, dense rainforests, and the deepest colds. With every episode viewers think to themselves, "If I were in that guy's shoes, I would be scared to death!"

Having questioned God's plans and heard God's responses, Habakkuk trembled in fear. Fear is a real thing, but there are different kinds of fear. The kind of fear Habakkuk felt when he encountered the Creator left him weak and shaken yet full of faith and joy. God took Habakkuk on a spiritual pilgrimage, and this sanctifying journey moved him from confusion and worry to contentment and worship. So he waited confidently and patiently for the day when God would put all things right.



Voices from Church History


"Fear not! I am with thee;
O be not dismayed, For
I am thy God, and will
still give thee aid; I'll
strengthen thee, help thee,
and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by My righteous,
omnipotent hand."⁴

—John Rippon's
Selection of Hymns

EXPLAIN the two categories of fear identified by Martin Luther: **servile fear** and **filial fear**.⁵ Note that Habakkuk experienced **filial fear** with God.

- **Servile fear** refers to the dreadful anxiety a prisoner feels when held by a public magistrate duty-bound to carry out his sentence. Here there can be no expectation of mercy, no hope of pardon.
- **Filial fear** refers to the respectful fear a child has for a parent. Though a child may be anxious about discipline from a parent, he or she can know that the discipline will end and that love still remains. It's a holy fear driven by deep respect and love. *Habakkuk experienced this kind of fear with the Creator God.*

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

 What are some reasons we may struggle to fear the Lord as our loving heavenly Father? (God's plans don't match our own plans; we are caught up in sin; we don't trust that He is good and for our good; someone may not know the Lord through faith in Christ; we think He is petty and vindictive like us)


SAY: Habakkuk's closing three verses are some of the most moving verses in the entire Bible. Through the centuries, they have been used by God in the lives of countless saints to give strength and hope in the midst of life's hurt and pain. With these words, Habakkuk finally acknowledged his absolute faith in God's plan.

EXPLAIN: Use the second paragraph in the DDG (p. 106) to highlight the *two main thoughts* in Habakkuk 3:17-19. Emphasize Habakkuk's faith in God leading to joy in the Lord in spite of his circumstances.

Habakkuk 3:17-19 communicates *two main thoughts*. *The first thought* is that God's judgment against Judah will be devastating. Habakkuk describes Judah's punishment by listing the demise of its main sources of food and agricultural commerce: fig trees, grape vines, olive trees, produce, sheep, and cattle. *The second thought* is that Habakkuk's faith is unwavering despite the pending pain of judgment. The prophet declared his faith in saying "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord."

SAY: Habakkuk finally found the joy in his journey. It was not to be found in thwarting God's plan or even understanding God's plan but in trusting the good, sovereign, and faithful God who saves and strengthens those who live by faith (see Ps. 73:25-28).

INTERACT: Ask group members the following question.

 What are some circumstances in which you have been able to rejoice in the God of your salvation? (be prepared to give an answer of your own to jump-start the conversation)

My Mission

EXPLAIN: It's easy to look at the world around us and begin to feel a strong sense of hopelessness. Habakkuk heard tell of and likely witnessed the collapse of most everything that was important to him. Yet through the loss and disappointment, he was able to distinguish between what was empty and fleeting and what was most precious—the God worthy of his faith, the God who saves by faith. It's okay to ask God hard questions. It's okay to admit fears and weaknesses. It's okay to experience an array of emotions as we face the struggles of life. But by faith, we know that God uses all these things to sanctify us and to shape us into the image of Christ Jesus, who saves us from our sin and will set all things right at His second coming. Rejoice and proclaim His good news!

READ the following missional application statement in the DDG (p. 107), and encourage group members to choose at least one of the options below as a way to respond to the truth of God's Word.

Because we have received forgiveness and life through the greatest evil ever—the crucifixion of Christ—we live with faith and joy through the injustices and evil we experience, showing the world the reality of our hope in Jesus.

- **In what areas of your life will you turn in faith to the sovereign, good God of our salvation?**
- **How can your group support and encourage one another as you strive to live with patience, by faith, and with joy?**
- **With whom will you be more open about your hope and joy in Christ with the goal of sharing the gospel?**

Voices from the Church

"We cannot begin a conversation about justice anywhere but at the cross of Jesus."⁶

—Raechel Myers

CLOSE IN PRAYER: Father, we worship You because Your ways are higher than our ways and Your thoughts higher than our thoughts. You know the end from the beginning and work all things for our good. So Father, help us by Your Holy Spirit to live by faith in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, whom You sent to save us from our sins and who will come again to set all things right. Help us to proclaim this gospel with joy as we look forward with patience to the day Your righteous kingdom resides on earth in full. Amen.

PACK ITEM 12: HYMN HANDOUT: Pass out copies of this hymn and sing it together.

INSTRUCT: As your group departs, encourage group members to read and respond to the **Daily Study** devotions in their DDG (pp. 108-110), which build and expand upon the group study. Also advocate for small groups or families to use **Encourage One Another** (p. 111) for mutual accountability and fellowship grounded upon the foundation of God's Word.

Daily Discipleship

Throughout the week following the session, use the ideas below to remind and encourage your group members to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The **Daily Study** devotions in the DDG (pp. 108-110) will help group members get into God's Word and study it for themselves. **Encourage One Another** (p. 111) will help group members and families fellowship with one another with purpose.

Daily Study

Brief daily devotions in the DDG (pp. 108-110) will help group members take initiative in their own discipleship.

- Make sure all group members have access to a Bible to read. Have some Bibles available to give to guests who may need one, or offer to get one and arrange a time to meet to give it and show how to navigate it for the devotions.
- Share the following idea from the devotion for **Day 5** as a part of point 3 in the session: **Habakkuk may have wanted to curse God in his weaker moments, but instead, he displayed for us what it looks like to allow God to sanctify us through our personal heartache and disappointment.**



Consider leading by example and reading the daily devotions yourself with your own DDG. Based on your study, use brief messages throughout the week (group text, email, social media) to encourage your group to keep up with their daily time in God's Word and to live it out. Here are a couple of examples you can use:

- **Day 1:** "God is good. God does care about us. God is doing something so amazing that we wouldn't believe it."
- **Day 2:** "Waiting is hard, but what makes it easier is knowing God hears every prayer and answers them in the best way possible."



Visit www.GospelProject.com/Blog for additional content and resources you can use to help group members gain more insight into their daily studies. Send group members a link or a portion of a blog post or other content that you believe will be helpful and encouraging for their time in God's Word.

Encourage One Another

This brief plan for fellowship and accountability in the group member's DDG (p. 111) will help groups of 2-4 people to meet sometime during the week to reflect on the session and to share how God is working and they are responding. It could also be used for family discipleship with students and children who are using *The Gospel Project* in their groups.

- **Encourage group members to share with one another testimonies of how God has demonstrated His faithfulness and goodness during difficult trials.**
- See yourself as a member of the group who also needs encouragement in the faith, and participate in such a group this week.

Additional Commentary

Point 1: God's authority over injustice enables His people to live with patience (Hab. 1:2-6).

“Habakkuk’s words suggest that he has been given special awareness of the situation in his country, causing him to ask, ‘Why do you make me look at injustice?’ (3:3). He sees the oppression and the perversion of justice clearly and cannot ignore it. The wicked paralyze the law, so that it cannot work to produce justice. In this respect, the world of Habakkuk is very similar to ours. The wicked of our day make unjust laws and ignore those good laws that are intended to promote justice. Our world needs men and women who love justice and are ready to suffer and die for it so that it can prevail.”⁷

“Habakkuk lamented to God (**how long?**) about overt **violence ... injustice**, and **oppression** during Jehoiakim’s reign. King Josiah (640-609 BC) promoted God’s law (2 Kings 23:24), but his son and successor Jehoiakim (609-598 BC) based his reign on injustice (Jer. 22:13) so that God’s **law** (Heb. *torah*) ceased to be honored. God responded that he would punish the sins of Judah through an invasion by the **Chaldeans** (the Babylonians).”⁸

Point 2: God's authority over evil enables His people to live by faith (Hab. 1:12-13; 2:3-4).

“Habakkuk’s complaint indicates the prophet’s familiarity with both the Lord and the Babylonians. Israel’s prophets showed an amazing understanding of how the world worked. They demonstrated knowledge of geography, history, and politics. They also served as conduits and tutors for who the Lord is and how he works in the world ... The prophets saw that God works in history to accomplish his purpose, even using godless nations to perform his designs. God used Assyria as the ‘rod of his anger’ to chastise Judah in Isaiah’s day (Isa. 10:5-15) and worked through the designs of Cyrus the Persian to deliver those exiled to Babylon (Isa. 44:28–45:7). Those who see only the short term always miss the significance of the work of God. Habakkuk, focusing on the short term, questioned how God could do such a thing.”⁹

“**the vision awaits its appointed time.** The fulfillment of the message may occur more slowly than expected, but God’s timing will be perfect. **wait for it.** While the judgment coming upon Judah will begin quite soon (586 BC), the punishment of the Babylonians will not be fulfilled until 539 ... The phrase **but the righteous shall live by his faith** is quoted in the NT to emphasize that people are saved by grace through faith (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; cf. Eph. 2:8) and that Christians should live by faith (Heb. 10:38-39). The kind of faith that Habakkuk describes, and that the NT authors promote, is continuing trust in God and clinging to God’s promises, even in the darkest days.”¹⁰

“The outcome of this warning is certain because God sees the inflated ego of those He is about to judge. This situation calls for patient endurance. The righteous one will live by his faith. Faith is needed because the judgment on the Babylonians will take place in the unforeseeable future, and the delay in judgment will not make sense from a human perspective.”¹¹

Point 3: God’s authority over difficulties enables His people to live with joy (Hab. 3:16-19).

“God answered Habakkuk’s questions. How could God use a wicked people such as the Chaldeans to punish a nation more righteous than itself? God’s answer was that though he might use Babylon to punish Judah’s sins, he also would punish Babylon for its sin. ‘The day of calamity’ would come on Babylon. What an amazing transformation! Because the prophet had been honest with God and took his genuine questions to a caring God, Habakkuk began to look at the world from a different perspective. Habakkuk had moved from ‘how long?’ (Hab. 1:2) to ‘I will wait patiently.’”¹²

“Anticipating great destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, Habakkuk has radically changed—he began by informing God how to run his world, and ended by trusting that God knows best and will bring about justice. **Though the fig tree should not blossom.** Verse 17 contains a frequently quoted list of material disasters in which all crops and livestock are lost, and as a result it is unclear how there will be food to eat. Yet even amid suffering and loss, Habakkuk has learned that he can trust God, and with that trust comes great joy, not in circumstances but in God himself: **yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.** Yahweh has become Habakkuk’s strength (see Ps. 18:32,39).”¹³

References

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