

Adult Teaching Resources

October 6, 2019



Season After Pentecost (June 16-November 24)

Choices That Matter

Habakkuk 1:1-2:4 (RCL 1:1-4, 2:1-4) – Faith for Hard Days

Jeremiah 29:1-9 (RCL 1, 4-7) – An Unlikely Garden

Jeremiah 31:27-34 – A Surprising New Start

Joel 2:23-32 – A Harvest to Remember

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Faith for Hard Days

Habakkuk 1:1-2:4 (RCL 1:1-4, 2:1-4)

FIT Teaching Guide

by David Woody

This adult teaching outline is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

Bible Background

*“Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.” Habakkuk 2:4*

“How long, O Lord?!” We read those words in scripture and we repeat those words out loud when things aren’t going right and we have a complaint to God. We all have those moments in our journey when we feel we’ve been treated wrong, unheard, or not given a chance. We want to blame someone, so we blame God.

Whether we want to admit it or not, at some point, we all blame God for our misfortunes. Today, we read the words of the prophet Habakkuk who complained directly to God. Habakkuk knew God would listen to his complaints.

Opening

After everyone arrives, have your group form smaller groups of 3-4 in a group. Give each group a piece of paper and a pen. Ask everyone to think of the complaints they take to God. The complaints can be small, like complaining about mosquitoes; or the complaints can be big, life-altering moments, like a death or loss.

Give each group a few minutes to write as many complaints they’ve taken to God. Then, ask each group to share, one complaint at a time.

After all the complaints have been shared or the time presses you to move forward, ask these questions:

What do our complaints say about us?

What does our willingness to complain to God say about our relationship with God?

Reading the Bible

To help your group understand the passage better, form two groups. One group will take the voice of Habakkuk.

The other group will take the voice of God. As our Lesson Writer explains in the Digging Deeper section of the lesson, Habakkuk is written in complaint and response form—Habakkuk complains, then God responds.

Make sure everyone has a copy of the passage, then ask the Habakkuk voice group to focus on verses 1:2-4 and 1:12-2:1. Ask them to read Habakkuk's complaints and rewrite/paraphrase/translate the words of the prophet to help them be more understandable for a contemporary audience.

Ask the God voice group to focus on verses 1:5-11 and 2:2-5. Ask them to read God's response and rewrite/paraphrase/translate the words of God to help them be more understandable for a contemporary audience.

When both groups are done, ask a volunteer from each group to read their rewritten section of the passage for everyone to hear. Read it in the order it's written so everyone hears the dialogue between Habakkuk and God.

After the reading, ask questions like these for conversation and deeper understanding:

What do we learn about Habakkuk from this section of scripture?

What do we learn about God from this section of scripture?

What is Habakkuk's major complaint?

What is God's response?

How does this passage inform your understanding of God?

Making Connections

In your opinion, is complaining a healthy practice? Why do you say that?

What is your major complaint about your job or position in life? Have you complained to God about it? What did you say? How did God respond?

Share an experience when you complained about something important and you received a response. What was the situation? How did you complain? Who did you complain to? What was the response? Was the response satisfactory?

When have you been the one someone complained to? How did you handle the situation?

In talking about Habakkuk's second complaint, our Lesson Writer points out that "Habakkuk perceived a disconnect between what he believed about God's actions and God's nature, and he was cheeky enough to point out the contradiction." What are God's actions? What is God's nature? Where, for you, is the disconnect?

Making Connections *continued*

Have you ever wondered if God were present at all for the faithful? What was the situation? What did you think God should have done? What happened?

When you go to God with a complaint, how long are you willing to wait until you receive an answer? How do you respond if the answer isn't something in your favor? How does this type of interaction affect your relationship with God?

If God had promised to send you a message, how would you want to receive it so you would know, without any doubt, it was from God? How does God usually send you messages?

So What?

Ask everyone to find their small groups from the beginning of the lesson. Share with everyone the final question our Lesson Writer poses in the lesson:

“As we bemoan the state of the world or suffer painful days, are we able to trust in God and remain faithful through it all, doing justice and trusting in God’s future, even when we can’t see it?”

Ask each group to consider this question and spend time in conversation around it.

How can we remain faithful?

How can we do justice?

How can we trust in God’s future?

How can we blindly move forward with God?

Give each group time to talk amongst themselves, then open the floor for a larger group conversation.

The Challenge

This week, go to God with everything you have—your celebrations, your needs, your thanksgivings, and your complaints. Tell God what you need to say, and then listen. Listen for a word from God.

Prayer

Loving God, thank you for hearing us when we praise you, and for when we come to you with complaints. You are our God and we are your people. Help us to live faithfully, every day, so that we might grow closer to you. Amen.

Digging Deeper

by Tony Cartledge

Digging Deeper is designed to support THE BIBLE LESSON by Tony Cartledge, printed in *Nurturing Faith Journal*. Watch for the “shovel” icon in the THE BIBLE LESSON, and then reference that item in this Digging Deeper resource. You can subscribe to either the digital or print edition of *Nurturing Faith Journal* to access the lessons. Please also ensure that each person in your class has a copy of *Nurturing Faith Journal* so they can prepare before the lesson.

The text—The Revised Common Lectionary reading omits 1:5-17, skipping from 1:4 to 2:1. Those verses, however, are essential for our understanding, so we will include them in our study.

A little history—Here’s a brief review of what was happening in the Middle East during that period: the prophets Zephaniah, Nahum, Habbakuk, and Jeremiah lived and ministered during a conflicted, difficult time in Israel’s history. The political scene was often such that they felt called to become political as well as spiritual advisors. Jeremiah, in particular, had a great deal to say about politics and foreign policy in addition to his role in promoting a healthy religious and spiritual life in Judah.

All of these prophets lived and worked in Judah: the northern kingdom of Israel no longer existed as an independent country, having been conquered by the Assyrians and turned into a vassal state. Many Israelites still lived there, but so did other people from foreign lands who had been displaced from their homes.

The international context contributed to Judah’s internal uncertainty and its search for stronger “homeland security.” After the Assyrian king Shalmaneser overran the Northern Kingdom and led Israel into exile in 722 BCE, the Assyrians dominated the international scene for the next 80 years.

Judah was forced to pay tribute to Assyria for most of that period, but the overlord’s strength weakened during the last half of the seventh century. Nabopolassar led Babylonia to independence from Assyria and sought to replace Assyria as ruler of all Mesopotamia. Caught up in its conflicts with the Babylonians, Assyria had fewer resources to spare in keeping Judah and other vassal countries in line. Egypt continued to be a major power that wanted to dominate Palestine, and Judah found itself caught in the middle. Its leaders sometimes sought to ally with one of the larger nations against the other in hopes of regaining more independence.

Under Nabopolassar, the Babylonians – who were also called “Chaldeans” during this period – conquered the Assyrian capital of Nineveh in 612 BCE. A few years later, they took control of Palestine after defeating the Egyptians in the battle of Carchemish in 605 BCE. Judah’s king Jehoiakim (608-598 BCE) was forced to accept Judah’s status as a vassal and pay a heavy annual tribute.

Jehoiakim rebelled sometime around 600 BCE, refusing to pay the tribute. This led Babylon’s king Nebuchadnezzar to invade the land, destroying many cities, crippling the economy, and carrying many of Judah’s leading citizens into exile (2 Kings 24:10-17). This humiliating defeat gave rise to a theological crisis in Judah, as the people wondered

Digging Deeper *continued*

whether Yahweh had been defeated by Babylon's gods, or whether God was not truly just and had intentionally abandoned the people.

This setting is the likely backdrop of Habakkuk's prophecy.

When was it written?—While most Old Testament scholars believe Habakkuk's preaching fits best in the period described above, Bernard Duhm argued that the word "Chaldeans" (*kasdim* in Hebrew) should be corrected to *kittim*, a word that referred to the Greeks. This would move the context to the late fourth century and the Greek invasion led by Alexander the Great.

Other scholars acknowledge that the social-political context of Habakkuk fits best in the late pre-exilic years surrounding 600 BCE, but point to literary evidence suggesting that the book reached its final form during the Persian period that followed the exile, sometime after the temple was rebuilt and its functions restored about 515 BCE (for more, see James Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi*, Smyth & Helwys Commentaries [Smyth & Helwys, 2011], 645-49).

Who was Habakkuk?—As indicated in the lesson, the biblical text says nothing about Habakkuk other than that he was a prophet.

An apocryphal book called "Bel and the Dragon," one of three additions to the book of Daniel that are found in Catholic Bibles, contains a fantastical story claiming that Habakkuk once provided food to Daniel (vv. 33-39). According to this story, Habakkuk had prepared a bowl of pottage to feed people who were harvesting his field, but an angel told him to take it to Babylon and give it to Daniel, who had just been thrown in the lion's den. When Habakkuk said he didn't know the way, the angel caught him by the hair of the head and transported him to Daniel, who thanked God and ate the pottage. Afterward, the angel again lifted Habakkuk by his hair and took him back to Judah.

That apocryphal story identifies Habakkuk as the son of a man named Joshua, of the house of Levi, the priestly tribe.

A later Jewish legend claimed that Habakkuk was the son of the Shunamite woman whose story is told in 2 Kings 4:8-17. Elisha promised that she would "embrace a son," and some rabbis connected Habakkuk's name with a verb that means "to embrace."

Habakkuk's name is unusual among the prophets in that it doesn't have a clear meaning and has no theophoric element like "-el" (as in Joel or Ezekiel) or "-yah" (as in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Obadiah, or Zephaniah). Most modern scholars think it is derived from the Babylonian word *hambakuku* (or *habaqququ*), which was the name of a houseplant, but also used as a personal name.

A word about structure—The book of Habakkuk is quite brief, and its structure is relatively straightforward:

First Superscription (1:1)

Digging Deeper *continued*

- I. Complaint and response (1:2-11)
 - A. Habakkuk's complaint (1:2-4) – “How long will the wicked prosper?”
 - B. God's response (1:5-11) – “You haven't seen anything yet.”
- II. A second cycle of complaint and response (1:12-2:5)
 - A. Habakkuk's complaint (1:12-2:1) – “Why punish us with someone even more wicked?”
 - B. God's response (2:2-5) – “Judging Babylon is God's business. Your business is to live with faithful integrity.”
- III. Woes pronounced upon the wicked. (2:6-20)
- IV. A hymnic celebration of God's faithfulness (3:1-19)

The prophetic burden—Note the superscription of v. 1: “The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.” The word translated as “oracle” is from the word *masa'*, a participle from the verb “to lift up” or “to carry.” Thus there is the connotation that the prophetic word is a “burden” to be carried, as it is sometimes translated.

Note also that Habakkuk's message is not something he *heard*, but that he *saw*. Thus he says “Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?” (v. 3a).

The Book of the Law—The story of the priest Hilkiah finding a “Book of the Law” during temple renovations, and subsequent religious reforms, is found in 2 Kings 22:1-23:25. Scholars often suggest that Josiah may have been influenced by Zephaniah and Jeremiah in his decision to renovate the temple and lead religious reforms.

Faith and faithfulness—The word *'emunat* is related to the word that came into English as “Amen.” The root word means to be firm or sure. “Amen” means “so let it be.” The noun form found in Hab. 2:4 and several other places in the Hebrew Bible has the idea of “being firm” and is best translated as “faithfulness” (see Deut. 32:43; Ps. 36:4, 40:10, 100:5; Lam. 3:23).

Hope and faithfulness—Hope is required if one is to remain faithful in extremely trying conditions. Some of the most beautiful and encouraging words of Habakkuk are found near the end of his hymn in chapter three: he could not have written them without a strong measure of hope.

*Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will exult in the God of my salvation. (Hab. 3:17-18)*

The Hardest Question

by Tony Cartledge

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How is Habakkuk interpreted in the New Testament?

Habakkuk 2:4 is quoted three times in the New Testament (Heb. 10:38, Gal. 3:11, Rom. 1:17), and each time the emphasis is on living “by faith” rather than living “in faithfulness.” Why is this?

A part of the answer is found in the way Habakkuk’s words were translated in the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX), a Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures dating back to the second or third century BCE. Another part of the answer lies in the multiplicity of ancient textual traditions and the willingness of early translators and of New Testament writers like Paul to reinterpret the Old Testament to suit their own purposes.

The LXX differs from the Masoretic text (the “standard” Hebrew Bible) in many ways, sometimes due to translation but clearly in some cases because the translators’ Hebrew text (preserved among the Hebrews in Egypt) differed in some ways from the version preserved in Babylonia during the exile, and in Jerusalem afterward.

Whether it was due to a different Hebrew text or the interpretation of the translators, the LXX translated Hab. 2:4b this way: “*ho de dikaios ek pisteōs mou zēsetai*”: “but the righteous, through faith of/in me, shall live.”

As we have demonstrated above, this is not the most accurate translation of the commonly accepted Hebrew text: Habakkuk was not talking about “having faith” in God as a matter of trust or belief, but about “living faithfully” before God in terms of one’s firm adherence to God’s law. And, while the Hebrew text speaks of one living in “his faithfulness,” with a third-person pronoun clearly referring to the righteous person’s faithfulness, the LXX uses a first-person pronoun to indicate “faith in me,” that is, in God.

New Testament writers typically quoted from the Greek translation, but not always accurately. The writer of Hebrews moved the personal pronoun so that it modifies “righteous,” giving the translation “but my righteous one will live by faith” (Heb. 10:38).

Paul left out the personal pronoun altogether, arguing in Gal. 3:11 that no one is justified by the law, for “The one who is righteous will live by faith,” and in Rom. 1:17 that “the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’”

In this way Paul took a verse that challenged Hebrews to be faithful to the law and turned it into an affirmation that salvation comes by faith, without the law. This is not to say that Paul’s teaching was wrong, but his loose use of the text would fall short of contemporary exegetical standards.

The Hardest Question *continued*

This is one of many examples in which New Testament writers read and quoted from the LXX rather than the Hebrew version of the Old Testament, often quoting them freely and adapting or reinterpreting them to suit their own purposes.