

HABAKKUK

How to Use This Discussion Guide with Your Group

Start with a prayer, and then read the introduction from the sheet. Read the portion of the text from your Bible or an app (use whatever translation you're comfortable with, but we suggest the New Living Translation (NLT) or the English Standard Version (ESV)). Then read the summary paragraph(s) and talk through the questions for that section. You can work through this guide in one session or spread it out over several – whatever works for your group. As you read and discuss, consider how what you're reading applies to your life today. Don't forget to close with prayer!

INTRODUCTION TO HABAKKUK

Habakkuk dares to ask God some blunt questions. If God is completely good and totally powerful, why isn't he answering all the cries for help? How can God use evil to carry out his judgments?

Habakkuk sees the corruption and lawlessness of Israel's society, and longs that God will establish his reign of justice. However, the prophet realizes that God is going to use a Babylonian (Chaldean) invasion to discipline Israel. This is a strange and awesome development, because the Babylonians are even worse than the Israelites!

Habakkuk's questions are resolved when he has a vision of God as a warrior of overwhelming glory, conquering all before him. The Lord is king of all the nations, and his judgments will bring about salvation. Like Job, Habakkuk comes to see his little situation in the vast context of God's majesty and purpose.

Habakkuk prophesies at a time when the armies of Babylon are invading Palestine. His work is different from that of the other prophets, in that it is entirely addressed to God. When will God intervene to punish oppression and expose idolatry? Why is he delaying his promised kingdom?

God reveals to Habakkuk that he is rousing the Babylonians to wreak his judgment on Judah. It is an astonishing turn of events.

Habakkuk stations himself before God like a watchman (2:1), to await his word. He is rewarded with the assurance that God is working out his purpose. It may seem slow from a human point of view, but it will surely come about.

Habakkuk arrives at a position of settled faith. Whatever happens, God is Lord. There may be total destruction in earthly terms, but with God there is perfect salvation. This realization gives Habakkuk a surge of confidence and praise.¹

¹ Andrew Knowles, *The Bible Guide*, 1st Augsburg books ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 381.

HABAKKUK QUESTIONS GOD

Read 1:1–17 in your Bible.

Habakkuk asks God his first big question: ‘How long must I call for help but you don’t listen?’ There is so much evil going on, with no one able to do anything to stop it. So why doesn’t God get involved?

God replies that he is about to do something quite extraordinary. He is bringing in the armies of Babylon—the strongest, cruelest and most unscrupulous force on earth. A self-made people who worship their creator.

Judah is a little nation, tossed on the waves of great empires. The empires rising and falling at this time are Assyria, Babylon and Egypt. As Habakkuk writes, Babylon is rising. Her armies are on the march. She has defeated the Assyrians—destroying Nineveh in 612 BC. A few years after this, in 608 BC, Judah is defeated by Egypt at the battle of Megiddo. Pharaoh Neco, the Egyptian king, kills Josiah the king of Judah and appoints his own rulers.

But Babylon is far stronger than Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar defeats Pharaoh Neco at the battle of Carchemish in 605 BC. After twenty years of threat and fear, Babylon will also defeat Judah—and carry her population into captivity in 586 BC.

Habakkuk asks a second question. How can God possibly use the forces of evil to carry out his holy judgments? How can he watch people being treated like fish in a net? Especially when those who gleefully catch the fish not only live in luxury, but worship the net that gives them success.

1. In verses 2-4, Habakkuk questions God. In verses 5-11, God answers. What is God’s answer?
2. What do you think was God’s purpose in using ungodly Babylon (Chaldeans) to punish Israel?
3. How are the Babylonians and their army pictured? How does Israel respond? How would you respond?
4. How does Babylon see itself (vv.7, 11b)? What problem does this pose for Habakkuk? For Israel?
5. What do you find most puzzling about the Lord’s answer: (a) The end justifying the means? (b) God using a double standard? (c) God using two wrongs to make a right? (d) Other? Explain.
6. How might God use terrorists, drug thugs, police states, and scandals in our day? In your life? To what end?

BABYLON IS DOOMED

Read 2:1–20 in your Bible.

Habakkuk insists on waiting for God's reply. God doesn't give him a straight answer, but tells him to write down a revelation on tablets of clay. This is a message which is to be kept and passed on—which will prove to be right in the end.

God reveals the truth about the Babylonians. They are proud, misguided—and doomed. They will get rich for a while by plundering other nations—but the time will come when they themselves will be ransacked. Crime and bloodshed are no way to establish a society, and God will bring their achievements to nothing.

Meanwhile, the right way to live is by faith in God.

*The earth will be filled with the
knowledge of the glory of the Lord,
as the waters cover the sea (2:14).*

Judah is to be destroyed by the Babylonians, a people far more vile and violent than Israel has become. But God will ensure that the Babylonians will themselves be judged and their conquests and achievements brought to nothing. In the end, the world will not be the domain of any human empire, but of the glorious kingdom of God.

Habakkuk chants five warnings against those who steal and murder. God will see to it that they get exactly what they deserve. The warnings seem to apply to individuals as well as nations. They seem to apply especially to Babylon:

- Those who have got rich by plunder will be plundered themselves.
- Those who have built on the profits of crime will find their very houses giving evidence against them.
- Nothing will last which is built by violence. God will use it for matchwood—and put a sea of justice in its place.
- Those who have brought about the shame of others will find that it's their own turn to be disgraced.
- Those who make idols are trusting in objects of wood and stone which are powerless to give teaching or guidance.

THE RIGHTEOUS WILL LIVE BY FAITH

The message of Habakkuk is that the right way to live is by faith in God (2:4). The future doesn't lie with the passing empires of this world, but with the glory of God. Lasting victory isn't won by armed strength—or even by religion. The victory is God's, and he will share it with his faithful people. Those who serve God now are on the right track, because knowing God is the only thing that will survive in the end. In centuries to come, Paul will quote this saying, 'The righteous will live by their faith,' in two of his letters—to the Romans and the Galatians.

Talking of the silence of dumb idols, Habakkuk urges the whole earth to keep silence in the holy presence of God.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR 2:1-20

1. Within the context of the book, who is “he” in verses 4-5? How are the righteous to live in contrast to “him”? In context, does this “living by faith” imply *national deliverance* or *spiritual salvation*? Explain.
2. What new theme does verse 18 introduce? How is that related to the fifth “woe” (vv. 19-20)? What ironic point do you see here in idols silent before people and people silent before God? What is the climax of the whole “woe” section (v. 20) and of the “end” for which Israel is to wait?
3. Compare Habakkuk 2:4 with Romans 1:16-18 and Galatians 3:10-14. What use does Paul make of famous passage to speak a new word to a new generation? How is Paul's emphasis like and unlike Habakkuk's?
4. “God may seem to be *late*, but is invariably *on time*” – Would Habakkuk say that? Would you? How does God measure time?
5. What help are the affirmations in verses 14 and 20 to you? What other “waters covered the sea” to God's glory (See Exodus 14)? When will the Lord do this a “second time” (see Isaiah 11:9-11)? What final fulfillment of this prophecy do you see in Babylon's fall at the end of history (see Revelation 17-18)?

GOD IS SUPREME

Read 3:1–19 in your Bible.

Habakkuk offers a prayer, which is a poem or psalm of great power and beauty. The word ‘shigionoth’ may come from a Hebrew word meaning ‘to wander’—so perhaps he hopes the musicians will improvise.

Like Job before him, Habakkuk's questions have led him to a new view of God. He praises the Lord who brought Israel from the south (Teman is Edom) and gave them the law in Sinai (the region of Mount Paran). God's majesty covers both heaven and earth. He can use all the forces of nature to deliver his judgments, making the sea roar or the sun stand still. He is ready, willing and able to defeat his enemies and deliver his people.

Habakkuk is left shaken and speechless by this awesome revelation of God. God is God and he will save! When and where and how he does it is entirely up to him. Habakkuk realizes he can wait for God. He isn't anxious any more. Food and wine don't matter now that his gladness comes from God.

With this glorious perspective, Habakkuk feels totally renewed and refreshed. He could jump a mountain for joy!²

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR 3:1-19

1. Why can the once woeful Habakkuk afford to be so joyful? How has his situation changed? How long after chapter 1 and 2 do you suppose it was written?
2. To what historical events do the poetic allusions refer in verses 3-5 (see Exodus 7-12)? In verses 6-7 (see Exodus 19:16)?
3. Compare verses 8-10 with Psalm 74:12-17 and 77:16-19. What similar images do these prayers use to evoke awe for God's mighty works? What other images (from nature, warfare or whatever) have a similar impact on you?
4. What does Habakkuk's irrepressible joy (vv. 17-19) mean in the context of injustice (1:12-17)? Of expectation (2:2-4)?
5. This hymn-like chapter stirred up vivid memories in Israel of God's might and mercy. When has God worked mightily and mercifully in your past? In your present, where do you want God to renew His mercy and work mightily again?
6. What new meaning would Habakkuk bring to the belief "It's always darkest before the dawn"? In what area of your life is God's power dawning? Where are you still waiting in the twilight for the sun to rise?
7. What things are barren in your life, as in Habakkuk's day (v. 17)? Are you ready to rejoice in the Lord, anyway? Why or why not?
8. What promise does verse 19 hold for your present situation? For your future?
9. What other key verse(s) are you prepared to "write down," "run with," or "wait for" (2:2-3)?

² Andrew Knowles, *The Bible Guide* (1st Augsburg books ed.; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 381-382.