

A CONTRAST IN LIFESTYLES
Habakkuk 2:2-5
May 11, 2008 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

Tonight we return to the prophet Habakkuk as we consider God's response to the second of Habakkuk's queries. Habakkuk had initially complained to God, questioning His actions in allowing the wicked to prosper. God's response to Habakkuk's complaint humbled him as God told Habakkuk not only had he discerned the situation correctly, but that He was going about humbling the entire nation in a way quite unexpected by Habakkuk (1:1-11). In his humility, Habakkuk boldly approached God once again. But as we noted last time, his tone had changed. He moved from questioning God and His motives, from wondering if God even heard his pleas, to a profound sense of the nature and character of God (1:12-17). As one writer put it, "He had plumbed the depths and found underneath the solid foundation of the everlasting 'Rock' – God's eternal changelessness" (1:12).¹ Habakkuk contemplated the riches of who God is and was satisfied that though he did not know all there was to know, God was in control. Everything that was happening was happening in God's world. Though perplexed, his anxiety turned to confidence, a confidence that led him to patiently wait for God's response (2:1).

Before we get into the text, I would make one comment about 2:1. Some take Habakkuk's statement, "I will keep watch to see what He will speak to me, and how I may reply when I am reproved" as another arrogant statement by Habakkuk. These would say that Habakkuk would wait for God's response and then respond to God's rebuke. I would agree that this would be profoundly arrogant of Habakkuk, to recognize beforehand that he would be rebuked by God, somewhat of an admission of his arrogance, and further argue with God concerning His judgment. However, the context does not really allow for this interpretation. O. Palmer Robertson, who holds to this view and who I highly respect as an Old Testament scholar, admits the difficulty here. "Admittedly," he writes, "it is rather difficult to imagine the prophet actually planning in advance to answer a rebuke from the Almighty" though he goes on to say, "Yet the radicalness of the problem with which Habakkuk wrestles, as well as the nature of the interchange with the Almighty up to this point, naturally leads to just such an expectation."²

The other view, which I hold, sees Habakkuk's statement, "And how I will reply when I am reproved" as reproof not from God, from whom he awaits an answer, but from his fellow men to whom he is called as a prophet. Martyn Lloyd-Jones suggests that the last phrase may mean, "what I shall answer when I am reproved by those who will not like my message."³ Habakkuk's statement then is not unlike what we read when Moses is called by God to lead His people out of Egypt. Moses asked, "What shall I say to them?" and God responds with His covenant name, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Ex. 3:13-14). This was Habakkuk's, "What shall I say to them?" And God responds as Habakkuk watches and waits for His reply.

I. A Contrast in Lifestyles (2:2-5)

We cannot be certain how long Habakkuk had to watch and wait for God's reply. However, when it did come, it came in clear and unmistakable terms in the form of a vision, a prophecy of all that would take place under the absolute sovereignty of God. It is God's response to

¹ David Prior, *The Message of Joel, Micah, & Habakkuk*, 227.

² O. Palmer Robertson, *NICOT: The Books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah*, 167.

³ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *From Fear to Faith*, 36.

Habakkuk's question, "Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why do You remain silent?" (1:13b). Habakkuk's struggle was in understanding how the faithful could believe if Jerusalem fell? How could God's reputation stand if the Babylonians prospered? What does the Babylonians commitment to idolatry and God's apparent tolerance of them do to His reputation? In the first part of the vision, God answers the first of these questions concerning the plight of the faithful, contrasting the ways of those who live by faith and those who remain steadfast in their pride and unrighteousness.

1. The significance of the vision (v. 2)

God often communicated with the prophets personally through visions, but when we look at these visions as they are given we note that they were not given to the prophets to keep to themselves. The role of the prophet was that of a mediator of a divine message from God to His people. It was given to them to give to others as the very Word of God.

The significance of this vision is twofold. First, in the immediate context of the book of Habakkuk, we have the only direct reference to God speaking, "**Then the LORD answered me and said.**" We know that God spoke to Habakkuk's first concern in chapter 1, but here Habakkuk wants to make it clear that he had received these words directly from God when he faced the rebuke of the people.

But of perhaps greater significance is that God instructed Habakkuk to write the words down, to "**record the vision and inscribe it on tablets.**" This underscored its significance not only for those who Habakkuk would address, but also for generations to come. It was to be written down not only so that it would not be forgotten, but so that others could read it and "**run**" with it. In other words, everyone who read what was written was to pass it on from generation to generation.

The command to write it "**on tablets**" is important. O. Palmer Robertson suggests:

The context suggests an intentional allusion to the inscribing of the original "ten words" of the book of the covenant. Originally Israel also had been directed to "inscribe" on whitewashed stones all the words of the law, and "to make very plain" this inscription (Deut. 27:8). Now Habakkuk is directed to *make it plain on the tablets* the vision being given to him. Reflecting the long-established pattern of inscribing a fresh copy of covenant law was an essential step in covenant renewal, Habakkuk's instructions include inscribing his vision on *the tablets*.⁴

What Palmer accurately asserts is that God's prompting Habakkuk to write these things down "**on tablets**" suggests something of import concerning God's covenant relations with His people. This must have been reassuring to Habakkuk whose concern was that God was somehow leaving His people to themselves and the horrors of the Babylonians. God was telling Habakkuk, "I am the God who is there, and I am not silent," to borrow a phrase from Francis Schaeffer. God's response to Habakkuk is framed in His purposes of being who He will be for His people, of upholding His covenant name for Himself, "I AM WHO I AM."

God takes great pride in His name in a righteous sense. For Him to act otherwise would be to the detriment of His character. God cherishes the character of His name. He revealed this in a poignant way to the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 42:5-8 we read His words to His chosen people:

⁴ Robertson, 168.

⁵ Thus says God the LORD, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and its offspring, Who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it, ⁶ “I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, ⁷ to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison. ⁸ I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, nor My praise to graven images.”

Israel failed in their calling to be a light to the nations. They profaned the name of God in serving their own purposes. Therefore God addresses them again in Isaiah 48:8-12:

⁹ “You have not heard, you have not known. Even from long ago your ear has not been open, because I knew that you would deal very treacherously; and you have been called a rebel from birth. ⁹ For the sake of My name I delay My wrath, and *for* My praise I restrain *it* for you, in order not to cut you off. ¹⁰ Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. ¹¹ For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act; for how can *My name* be profaned? And My glory I will not give to another. ¹² Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, I am also the last.”

Habakkuk questioned how God’s name and reputation could be upheld in the current situation. God reminded Him of His covenant and that all that was taking place was for the very purpose of upholding His name, of no longer allowing His name to be profaned among His people.

2. The character of the vision (v. 3)

Not only does the vision have a significance rivaling that at Sinai, but its character is important in that it is prophetic and certain. God said, “**For the vision is yet for the appointed time.**” The actual fulfillment of these words would not take immediate effect. It would happen in a time divinely chosen by God, and not before. However, God assures Habakkuk that “**it will not fail.**” Further, “**Though it tarries, wait for it, for it will certainly come, it will not delay.**” What was God’s purpose in this prophecy?

As is often the case, God’s divine delays are for the good of His people. It is to strengthen them in their faith. For instance, we live in the day of the Lord’s delay of His return. Peter addressed the purpose for this in 2 Peter 3:3-13:

³ Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with *their* mocking, following after their own lusts, ⁴ and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For *ever* since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.” ⁵ For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God *the* heavens existed long ago and *the* earth was formed out of water and by water, ⁶ through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. ⁷ But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. ⁸ But do not let this one *fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a

roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.¹¹ Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness,¹² looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat!¹³ But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.

The Lord's delay is to spur His people on to holy conduct and godliness. The same is true here in Habakkuk. The delay was to encourage their faithfulness, to depend on Him and His promises in the midst of adversity. Just as the mockers in 2 Peter, God knew that there would be those who would not like the response they heard and would dismiss it as ineffective or false. The people would be tempted to call the prophecy a lie or to expect God not to act. One writer suggests that "here Yahweh agrees with the prophet, who is worried that he will be rebuked as a liar (2:1).⁵ But God's warning, written in stone, was not to dismiss it, **"Wait for it,"** he says, **"for it certainly will come, it will not delay."**

We too can take great comfort in these words. What God has said will most certainly come to pass, in His time, and not before. When we look at the world around us today, we must take care not to let the ways of the enemy lull us into thinking that perhaps God has forgotten His chosen ones. He is on the throne, and all of His purposes are being fulfilled right in our very midst. When we face adversity from the world, we can depend on the One who is always faithful!

3. The substance of the vision (vv. 4-5)

Though the prophecy was future, God described what would take place by contrasting the proud and the faithful. There are only two ways: puffed up desire or faith. The **"proud one"** refers to the Babylonians, who were a law unto themselves (1:7), promoting themselves and whose "strength is their god" (1:11b). This had led them to chase after the impure desires of their hearts, **"his soul is not right within him,"** translated, "He is unrighteous." He is unrighteous because he looked at his own ways as right rather than God's way of righteousness. Their ways are further spelled out in v. 5:

- (1) The Babylonians were known drunkards, given to much wine.
- (2) The Babylonians sought to gratify the desires of the proud hearts, enlarging the appetite though never fully satisfied.
- (3) The Babylonians were greedy, taking from the nations that which was not theirs by right.

The way of the Babylonians is further addressed in the pronouncement of judgment in the remainder of the chapter, five woes that awaited them for their pride that we will look at in a few weeks.

However, this is not the case with the righteous. With the key words of the book of Habakkuk, in fact what some call the great text of the Bible, God announced that through all of this, in spite of the tarrying and the consequent atrocities at the hands of the Babylonians and the apparent prosperity of the wicked, **"the righteous will live by his faith."** We will return to the theological implications of this next week as we examine the New Testament use of this phrase. But for our purposes here, there is no doubt that God suggests that the lifestyle of His people, **"the righteous,"** those who have been truly justified, will look remarkably different than the

⁵ James Bruckner, *NIV Application Commentary: Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, 226.

way of the proud. In v. 5 we read that not even death satisfies the way of the proud, but here the righteous are fully satisfied with the life God has granted to them by grace and demonstrate their satisfaction in living faith. Not only that, but God here corrected Habakkuk's false conclusion from 1:13 that the righteous were being swallowed up by the proud. God says, "No, Habakkuk, the righteous will live by faith. They will not be swallowed up. They will live and flourish."

At this point, the implication of these words for us today becomes evident. Habakkuk had fallen into a trap, looking at the events of the world and the circumstances of his people and become despondent. However, he went to the right place – he cried out to God, and God answered. God has spoken, and either the people will believe God, or they won't. **"The righteous will live by their faith."**

Martyn Lloyd-Jones shows the contrast of lifestyles that is given in these verses.

The truth stated is that there are only two possible attitudes to life in this world: that of faith and that of unbelief. Either we view our lives in terms of our belief in God, and the conclusions which we are entitled to draw from that; or our outlook is based upon a rejection of God and the corresponding denials. We may either 'withdraw' ourselves from the way of faith in God, or else we may live by faith in God. The very term suggests corresponding ways of life. As a man believes so is he. A man's belief determines his conduct. The just, the righteous, shall live by faith; or, in other words, the man who lives by faith is righteous. On the other hand, the man who 'draws back' is unrighteous because he is not living by faith. Here is the great watershed of life, and all of us are on one side of it or the other... Faith means taking the bare Word of God and acting upon it because it is the bare Word of God. It means believing what God says simply and solely because He has said it. Those heroes of the faith in Heb. xi believed the Word of God simply because God had spoken. They had no other reason for believing it. Why, for example, did Abraham take Isaac and go with him up that mountain? Why was he on the point of sacrificing his son? Simply because God had told him to do so... Living by faith means basing the whole of life upon faith in God.⁶

⁶ Lloyd-Jones, 50, 52.