

WHEN GOD BALANCES HIS BOOKS

HABAKKUK 1-2

Habakkuk was a prophet with a problem. It was a problem faced by a lot of preachers in 21 century America. It was the problem of “business as usual.”

From a strictly naturalistic point of view, things were going well.

- The economy was doing okay.
- Workers were working.
- Peace was prosperous.
- Business was busy.
- The rich were becoming richer.
- And the poor didn’t have press coverage, so everyone seemed to be happy.

But in all of this busy-ness and prosperity, the people had forgotten God. He just didn’t fit into their busy schedules. And this spiritual forgetfulness led to other problems.

“Business as usual” took on a seamier side. There was oppression and a cut-throat attitude at work. Lawyers were making a bundle by lining their pockets with legal loopholes. People were out to get what they could get while the getting was good. Justice was awarded to the one who had the deepest pockets.

Habakkuk looked out at the nation of Judah and he saw all of this and it drove him to his knees. He set out to pray. The three chapters that make up the book of Habakkuk consist of his prayer diary.

Habakkuk’s prayer begins with a question: WHY DOES GOD ALLOW EVIL TO CONTINUE?

The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.

How long, O LORD, will I call for help,

And You will not hear?

I cry out to You, “Violence!”

Yet You do not save.

³ Why do You make me see iniquity,

And cause me to look on wickedness?

Yes, destruction and violence are before me;

Strife exists and contention arises.

⁴ Therefore the law is ignored

*And justice is never upheld.
For the wicked surround the righteous;
Therefore justice comes out perverted. (Habakkuk 1:1-4).*

There is a Principle here: **GOD BALANCES HIS BOOKS IN HIS OWN TIME.**

Habakkuk looks at the shape of the modern judicial system and he asks, “Lord, how long can it go on like this? Why do you allow such things to happen?”

- Why do bad things happen to relatively good people?
And...
- Why do good things happen to bad people?

I can empathize with Habakkuk. There are few things more frustrating than to see bad people “get away with it.”

I have a confession to make. I like to watch those old-time movies where the villain gets his come-uppance and where the hero wins the day and rides off into the sunset to live happily ever after. But life is not always like that. All too often, we see...

- Bad things happening to relatively good people.
And...
- Good things happening to bad people.

Habakkuk looks at it and asks, “Lord, how can you let this go on? When will you do something? Have you gone on an extended vacation? If you a good God, then why do you allow evil to continue?”

Why does God permit bad things and bad people to continue? I don’t know all of the answers, but I DO know one very important answer as it relates to us. God permits bad things and bad people to continue for YOUR benefit.

*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. (2 Peter 3:9).*

There are a lot of people who seem to think that God is overworked and underpaid and would like to stop all of the sin and evil in the world, but He is just not up to the task. Sure He has made promises and certainly He will get around to fulfilling them one of these days, but He has been around for a long time and He is slowing down.

That isn’t the case. The Lord is NOT slow about His promise. The reason that God’s judgment has not fallen is because God is PATIENT. To whom is this patience directed?

Look again at the verse. He is patient toward YOU.

This patience is manifested by the fact that God's judgment seems to be on hold. In fact, it seems to be downright postponed. Some might even think that God is never going to get around to judging evil.

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. (2 Peter 3:10).

God's judgment WILL come and it will come like a thief. You know how a thief comes. He comes unexpectedly. He doesn't call you up earlier in the evening and say, "Hello, I'm going to be robbing your house at 3:15 in the morning. Could you leave out some milk and cookies with all of your worldly valuables?"

God's judgment will come unexpectedly and it will come completely, but in the interim it has not yet come because there is a period of patience.

*Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, ¹⁵ and regard the **patience** of our Lord as salvation (2 Peter 3:14-15a).*

Do you see verse 15? We are to regard the patience of the Lord as salvation. Here is the point. The reason that you are saved today is because the Lord was patient with sin and evil in the first century and in the second century and in every century up to the present. He is patiently waiting for all to come to repentance. And when all have come who are going to come, then judgment will come.

In the meantime, evil seems to be getting the best of good. In the meantime, sin seems to go unpunished. And that is the source of Habakkuk's complaint. And so, the Lord gives an answer. But it is not the answer for which Habakkuk was looking. In verse 5 we see God's answer to Habakkuk's question:

"Look among the nations! Observe! Be astonished! Wonder! Because I am doing something in your days You would not believe if you were told." (Habakkuk 1:5).

God has an answer to Habakkuk's prayer. But it was not the answer that the prophet thought was coming. I don't know what Habakkuk expected, but it wasn't this.

- Perhaps he hoped for the best, that God would miraculously change the heart of the king or that there would be a revival as people turned back to the Lord.

- Or perhaps he thought that heaven would open and angels would come forth in judgment, putting down evil and raising up good and setting all things right.

What Habakkuk was not ready for was the promise that God gave. It was something completely unexpected.

Here is the Principle: **WHEN GOD BALANCES HIS BOOKS, HE DOES IT HIS WAY.**

Has God ever done that to you? You cry out to Him that He would change your situation and you have it all worked out in your mind exactly what God could do to change that situation, but He ignores your pet solution and comes up with one that is completely different. That is what happens here.

*“For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,
That fierce and impetuous people
Who march throughout the earth
To seize dwelling places which are not theirs.
They are dreaded and feared;
Their justice and authority originate with themselves.
Their horses are swifter than leopards
And keener than wolves in the evening.
Their horsemen come galloping,
Their horsemen come from afar;
They fly like an eagle swooping down to devour.
All of them come for violence.
Their horde of faces moves forward.
They collect captives like sand. (Habakkuk 1:6-9).*

We read this passage and it comes as no surprise. After all, we have the perspective of history. We know that in 605 B.C. a young Babylonian prince by the name of Nebuchadnezzar entered into a coalition with the Medes and the Scythians to attack the Assyrian Empire and bring it to its knees. His forces swept over Assyria and her Egyptian allies at the Battle of Carchemish and then swept down the Levant to Israel.

It was with total shock that the people of Israel saw this sweeping horde of foreigners descend upon their land. In the years that followed, Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem, not once, but on three different occasions. Each time was worse than the previous occasion.

First Captivity	603 B.C.	Nebuchadnezzar takes tribute from the Jews and takes a number of the sons of the nobility as hostages to be raised in Babylon, including Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.
Second Captivity	597 B.C.	When the Jews rebel, Nebuchadnezzar returns, takes Jerusalem and takes 10,000 captives back, including Ezekiel.
Third Captivity	586 B.C.	This time Nebuchadnezzar comes and he destroys the city of Jerusalem and he burns the temple to the ground and he takes the entire population captive.

You have to know and understand that the capital city of the Chaldeans was Babylon and every time you see Babylon in the Bible from the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 to the Harlot that is called Babylon in Revelation 17-18, the name “Babylon” is vilified and serves as an image of all that is bad with the world. Now we read that it is Babylon that comes and takes the people of God into captivity.

Why? Why would God allow such a thing? It was a judgment against sin. This means it was no chance happening. God says to Habakkuk, “I am not merely allowing this to take place, I am the one *raising up the Chaldeans* (1:6).

This is a picture of the sovereignty of God. He is in control, not only when good things happen, but when bad things happen, too.

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God (Romans 13:1).

It is God who raises up presidents and potentates. He is the ultimate authority on planet earth. He is the only real superpower. And even when an evil nation like Babylon comes to power, we find that God is the One who has ordained that it should be.

Is that bad? No, that is GOOD. It means that absolutely nothing can ever come into your life without having passed through a nail-scarred hand. It means that your prayers really do count because you are praying to the One who has complete control over all things.

At the same time, a lot of people are uncomfortable with the teaching that God is in control of ALL things. They immediately think, “How could this be? How could God be in control when we see a Hitler or a Stalin or a Saddam Hussein?”

If those questions come to your mind, you are in good company. Habakkuk had the same sort of questions. He asks the question: WHY DOES GOD USE EVIL PEOPLE?

Are You not from everlasting, O LORD, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge; and You, O Rock, have established them to correct.

Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor. Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they? (Habakkuk 1:12-13).

Habakkuk questions the actions of God. He doesn't deny them. He doesn't say, "God, you can't do that." After all, Habakkuk knows that God is God and that He can do however He pleases.

God is Sovereign: *Are You not from everlasting... You, O LORD, have appointed them to judge... You, O Rock...*



God is Just: *Your eyes are too pure to approve evil, and You can not look on wickedness with favor*

Habakkuk looks at these two qualities of God, that He is completely sovereign and that He is completely just and righteous and he scratches his head and he says, "I don't get it!"

Here is the question: How can God use evil people to do His work? It is true, the people of Israel had turned away from God. But the Babylonians were even worse.

*The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook,
Drag them away with their net,
And gather them together in their fishing net.
Therefore they rejoice and are glad.
Therefore they offer a sacrifice to their net and burn incense to their fishing net;
Because through these things their catch is large,
And their food is plentiful. (Habakkuk 1:15-16).*

This imagery of a hook and a net was not completely symbolic. Some of it was quite literal. Archaeologists have uncovered wall paintings that depict the Babylonian conquerors shoving a literal hook through the lips of conquered people in order to lead them about like fish on a line.

Habakkuk sums up his question in verse 17: *Will they therefore empty their net and*

continually slay nations without sparing?

Here is his question: You are a holy and a just God and you are going to use THESE people to accomplish your will?

The answer to this question is introduced in chapter 2. It begins with a command for Habakkuk to make a permanent record of this answer.

Then the LORD answered me and said, “Record the vision and inscribe it on tablets, that the one who reads it may run. (Habakkuk 2:2).

The Lord is going to give Habakkuk an answer, and it is such an important answer that Habakkuk is told to take notes. These notes were are not just for Habakkuk; they are to be preserved in writing for others to read, too.

It is to be inscribed on TABLETS. This wasn’t the usual method of writing. Tablets were expensive and labor-intensive. Much more commonplace was the medium of ostrica; broken pieces of pottery. Most of the archaeological finds from this period consist of such pottery. It would be used for day-to-day writing.

But this message is so important that it is to be put onto tablets. It is to be written so that its message can be passed on.

“For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay. (Habakkuk 2:3).

The Lord tells us that His promise WILL come to pass. It might not come to pass this Tuesday, but the prophecy will be fulfilled. Throughout the rest of the chapter, we see that **GOD BALANCES HIS BOOKS WITHOUT PARTIALITY.**

There are five woes proclaimed...		
2:6	<i>Woe to him who increases what is not his</i>	This was the sin of the rich person who takes advantage of his neighbors by charging undue interest. We call such a person today “loan sharks,” but the activity is no longer limited to mobsters and criminals.
2:9	<i>Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to put his nest on high</i>	This is related to the previous woe. It is feathering your own nest at the expense of others.

2:12	<i>Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed, And founds a town with violence!</i>	We are called to be people of peace. It is amazing how often we are ready to support military action against a country for which we do not particularly care.
2:15	<i>Woe to you who make your neighbors drink, Who mix in your venom even to make them drunk So as to look on their nakedness!</i>	The Lord pronounces a woe upon the sin of sensuality. The world says, have a drink and forget all your troubles - the Lord says, "Eat, drink and remember." Notice the warning in verse 16 - there is coming a cup of judgment in the Lord's right hand that will come around to you.
2:19	<i>Woe to him who says to a piece of wood, "Awake!" To a mute stone, "Arise!"</i>	This last woe is to the one who commits idolatry - the sin of worshiping something other than God. You might be thinking, "I know better than that!" Do you? Do you ever put other things first in your life? That is idolatry.

Now there is something that I want you to see in each of these woes. They are directed against the coming Babylonian Empire. God is saying, "I am going to judge the coming kingdom of Babylon because of these sins."

But as you heard the listing of those sins, you might have been uncomfortably aware that our own nation is guilty of those very things. The people to whom Habakkuk wrote had the same reaction. He is writing to Jews - Israelites who are living in and around Jerusalem. He is writing to the chosen people. He is writing to God's people. And they are beginning to shift in their seats uncomfortably as they realize that they are also guilty of these same sins.

God show no partiality when He balances His books. He does not care if you are American or Chinese, black or white, Presbyterian, Baptist or Charismatic.

For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:17).

There is a point here. It is that God eventually balances the books. At the Battle of Chancellorsville, the Union army outnumbered the Confederate army by 10 to one. They had more men, they had the advantage of position and they were better equipped. That morning, the Union General Joseph Hooker met with his staff and summarized, "Not

even God could take this victory away from us.” And then he went out and suffered one of the greatest losses in the entire war. What happened? God balanced the books. He does, you know.

The good news is that **GOD ULTIMATELY BALANCED THE BOOKS UPON THE CROSS**. That is what the cross was all about. Sin was judged. The penalty of death was paid. The supreme sacrifice was made. Where the righteousness of God demanded the death of the sinner, the Righteous One of God died in the place of sinners. And that means we have life and forgiveness and salvation through faith in Him.

“For the vision is yet for the appointed time; It hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; For it will certainly come, it will not delay.

*“Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; **But the righteous will live by his faith.** (Habakkuk 2:3-4).*

What is it about faith that is so pleasing to God? Faith is the admission that God has done all of the work of salvation on your behalf and that you can do nothing to save yourself. Faith is saying that God is God and that His grace is sufficient for you. Faith is coming to the Lord with empty hands and a broken heart and looking to Him to be that which fills and heals.

Look again at verse 4. Do you see what it is that is contrasted to faith? What it is that is the opposite of faith? *The proud one!* Pride is the opposite of faith. The just do not live because of the goodness of their works. They do not live because of their arrogant pride in thinking that they are worthy of God’s acceptance. The just shall live by faith. The just shall live by confessing their inadequacy before a holy God and trusting in His Son for our salvation.

The third chapter of Habakkuk is a song of praise about the wonders of a God who is so great that He moves in history, not only to balance the books in history, but to balance them on our behalf as He saves us from our sins and sets our feet upon firm ground.

And that tells me about what is to be my reaction to this message. What do I do when I come to understand the salvation that God has wrought in a world filled with violence and suffering? I am to believe. And I am to be glad. And I am to sing. Theology is not to remain in the pages of our notebooks. It must sing! And so should we.