

Habakkuk

Leader Guide

The righteous will live by faith.

Habakkuk 2:4

The following Bible study was written by WELS Women's Ministry executive team member Naomi Schmidt and member of Christ Lutheran Church, Denmark, WI. This study has been theologically reviewed by Professor-emeritus Joel Gerlach.

The narrative sections should be read by participants.

Habakkuk

Lesson 1 - Introduction

There are times in our life when we look around and wonder if things could get any worse. Whether we are looking at the national economy or world politics, things can seem out of control. The media inundates us with stories of hardship and trials, injustice and disaster. We wonder how long the earth can endure such pain; how many more bad things can happen?

Would it surprise you to find out that hundreds of years before Christ was born, God's people felt the same way? As you listen to Habakkuk's story, put yourself in his shoes – it is quite easy. He is overwhelmed because things seem to be spinning out of control. He calls out to God – and he gets an answer. But just as we often experience, God's answer isn't what Habakkuk expects.

God calms Habakkuk's heart without changing his circumstances, and He often does the same for us. Our pleas for help are not always answered the way we want but our faithful God does hear and answer us. Studying these few short chapters will bring a renewed appreciation for the power and mercy of our God. He will reveal Himself as the Lord of history, the Master of kings and a personal Savior who knows and loves us intimately. These verses are a beautiful example and encouragement for us as we long to be reminded of God's sovereignty.

The Author

We don't know too much about Habakkuk, but Luther said his name "signifies an 'embracer' or one who embraces another – takes him into his arms; that is, he comforts them and holds them up, as one embraces a weeping child to quiet it with the assurance that if God wills, all shall soon be better."

- Read 2 Corinthians 1:4 and talk about comfort. Explain how God has brought you through hardship to equip you to help someone else. As we read Habakkuk, listen to his complaints and relate to his cry for help. Watch how God changes Habakkuk's heart in the midst of his unchanged circumstances and equips him to comfort God's people.

Make sure the conversation centers on the work of God rather than a series of emotional stories recounting hardship. If someone seems stuck on the hardship they've been given, ask them to

consider how God might use that situation to make them sensitive to the needs of others, or encourage them to listen to Habakkuk's message!

- We know we can't always just make things better. Talk about the true messages of hope God has given us in His Word that we can share with others.

God demonstrated his love for us by sending Christ while we were still sinners! Grace, forgiveness, and love are ours in Christ – always! God promises to be with us in hardship; He listens to our prayers and loves us unconditionally. He is working things out for the good of His Kingdom, our spiritual growth and for His glory! We can trust Him and Habakkuk's story will lead the way!

The Historical Setting

The book was written around 626-605 BC. At this time the Assyrians would have been defeated and Babylon was beginning to take power. God's people in the Old Testament had many struggles. Complacency and unfaithfulness filled their hearts but they also faced brutal armies and relentless attacks at their borders.

- Think of how God's people were oppressed by Babylon, Assyria and Persia and recall some of the familiar stories from this approximate time in history.

Daniel, Shadrach/Meshach/Abednego, Esther, or Jeremiah the lamenting prophet.

Israel's leadership had split hundreds of years earlier into the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom (Israel) had already been taken captive by Assyria but Habakkuk was part of the Southern Kingdom (Judah) which remained. King Josiah, a good king, had brought reforms to God's people that resulted in a spiritual revival, but he was followed by King Jehoiakim who brought back godless attitudes and behaviors. This was the setting when Habakkuk was writing. It was a time of national corruption and international crisis.

- Discuss what the setting looks like today and evaluate how we manage those conflicts as Christians.

The godlessness and conflict in our world is the result of sin. We continue to struggle against sin in our personal lives and in the world as we wait for Jesus to return. Be cautious of political undertones and be respectful of our nation's leaders in your discussions.

Outline of the book

Lesson 1	1:1-11	Habakkuk's First Question and the Lord's Answer
Lesson 2	1:12-2:20	Habakkuk's Second Question and the Lord's Answer
Lesson 3	3:1-19	Habakkuk's Concluding Song of Praise

Read Chapter 1:1-11

1. Generally speaking, what is Habakkuk's complaint?

Why aren't you doing something??? There is violence, injustice, strife, conflict, and destruction everywhere. The wicked people are winning!

2. Restate his complaint for the 21st century.

It isn't much different...

3. Look at verse 3 - Several translations say, "Why do you tolerate wrong doing?" but the ESV (English Standard Version) says, "why do you idly look at wrong?" Both imply an attitude of indifference. Discuss whether God is ever indifferent about sin. If He isn't indifferent, what's going on?

God is never indifferent about sin or souls. Look ahead to verse 13, "you cannot tolerate wrong." His justice and holiness are perfect. Rather He has a time and purpose for everything (Ecc. 3 1-8).

4. Look at verse 4 – Does it ever feel like the law is paralyzed? In what way?

Social justice doesn't work the way it should but most importantly, God's laws are condemned as intolerant. His guidance is not leading our nation, it feels like it's not working. But we know His statutes are perfect and His Word is powerful!

5. What is the Lord's answer?

Look, watch, be amazed. I'm bringing in the Babylonians. They are evil, strong, hell-bent (v. 9) mercenaries. Note verse 11 – they are GUILTY men whose strength is their god. God is going to use guilty, godless, evil men. I don't know about you, but I like it better when He uses godly men! Yet God is still in control!

6. Restate the Lord's answer for the 21st century.

I will raise up whoever I want to accomplish my plan and you cannot imagine how I can work all things for the good of my Kingdom! Just watch!

Closing Prayer

Habakkuk

Lesson 2

Read Chapter 1:12 - 2:1 (the second complaint)

1. How does his second conversation with the Lord begin? Restate verse 12a.

Are you kidding me? Aren't you the Almighty God who knows everything? (spoken with great reverence). Sounds like you've made up your mind.

2. What is his second point?

Do you realize who they are and what they've done? It seems the details God provided in His first response weren't enough to prove to Habakkuk that He was fully aware of who the Babylonians were. Habakkuk speaks of their conquests, "they swallow up those more righteous than themselves" (v. 13), "he gathers them in his net and rejoices" (v. 15). Do you wonder if Habakkuk was trying to get God's attention when he talks about how they "sacrifice...and burn incense" to the net? And by the way, they're prospering financially! Will it never end? Their conquests just seem to continue!

3. Do NOT miss Habakkuk's final statement of his second complaint in 2:1. Memorize his two respectful "I will" statements!

*I will stand and station myself on the ramparts (standing as a watchman)
I will look to see what He will say and what answer He will give.*

Habakkuk is not idly shaking his fist at God. He is pouring out his heart with the confident assurance that God will answer him!
Habakkuk confidently waited for God's response. What does that say about his faith?

It was very certain! He wasn't challenging God he was genuinely asking!

How do you feel when you're waiting for an answer? Read James 1:5-7 and describe active, faith-based waiting.

Have your children ever played in the outfield and been distracted by a butterfly or bored because the ball never comes? Then when a fly ball is hit, they are not ready. How much better they play when their head is in the game and they know the stats on who is hitting, where the base runners are, and how many outs they have. They are watching attentively and waiting to see what happens. That is how we wait for answers to our prayers. Not in a ho-hum, casual way but with expectation, anticipation and readiness. We WAIT for answers – not WONDER if we'll get them.

Read Chapter 2:2-20 (the second answer)

1. How did God respond to Habakkuk in 2:2-3? Restate His answer.

You are going to want to write this down. Tell everyone.

Your bible may have a footnote saying the word “herald” could include “anyone who reads it.” Like a poster you read and tell someone about (or theses on a church door).

Note also that God states “it speaks of the end and will not prove false”. Even though it may take a while (v. 3b) it is coming and you can be sure of that.

2. What does that mean to us?

It gives us confidence that what is written in God’s Word is true and meant to be shared with others. We can show them Scripture and know that it will not “prove false.” We can look to judgment day with the assurance that He will come and we are saved by grace through Jesus no matter how long it takes!

3. Now God shows a contrast between Babylon and the righteous – read verse 4.

*Babylon is selfish/sinful;
the righteous live by faith.*

4. The second part of this verse seems extremely significant. Look up these verses:

Romans 1:17

Galatians 3:10-12

Hebrews 10: 38

Talk about that passage in your own words.

*On their own, people are sinful and selfish
Jesus brings us His righteousness through grace and faith.*

If you have a mature group, this is a great place to clarify that we are not made righteous by OUR faith but by what Jesus gave to us through faith. His righteousness was given to us. The point is that it is grace, not the sincerity of our faith or the depth of our convictions that makes us righteous. Faith is merely the hand that receives. This may be a new concept to them so make sure it is clear. Ask your pastor if you have questions.

The group may also remember that this verse had a profound impact on Luther when he taught the book of Romans. It is a verse that helped him see the Gospel message clearly, that our righteousness comes from Christ NOT from our faith or religious zeal.

5. There are some little phrases in Scripture that are poetically beautiful. See the gem in verse 5.

He is greedy as the grave.

6. Listen to God's angry thunder as He bellows judgment 5 times, "Woe to him..."
Read verses 6, 9, 12, 15 and 19.

There is an appropriate time and place to be respectfully fearful of God! Thank Jesus that we are not on the "woe to him" side of God's anger!

7. Discuss this concept: God is using the Babylonians for His purpose and then He will turn around and judge them for their sinfulness.

Our Holy and Just God never leaves sin unpunished. Since the Babylonians chose to be their own gods, the Almighty Lord will give them His full wrath. Only God who is perfect and holy could use these sinful people for His divine purpose and still hold them accountable in judgment. Even if God uses the actions of wicked people or allows their evil for a time, He doesn't overlook their sin. He mentions this of Pharaoh as well (Ex. 9:16-17,14:4,17).

When we see injustice and violence around us we should remember that God does not leave sin unpunished and on judgment day those who refused Christ's payment for sin have an eternal debt to pay for their sin!

8. Listen to the majestic and final chorus of the Lord's reply in verse 20! Just when His thunderous judgment sounds ominous, the heavens burst forth with beautiful reflections of Isaiah 6. Let this verse bless you with confidence in your Savior God and fill your heart with quiet peace.

Closing Prayer

Habakkuk

Lesson 3

Read Chapter 3 (Habakkuk's Song of Praise)

1. Note the little comment in the introduction of this chapter (v. 1) that this is a prayer, then it says, "On shigionoth." If you skip ahead to the last line, it also says "For the director of music. On my stringed instrument." Habakkuk is bursting out in song to praise God!

What a spirit-filled response to God's message! We can't help but sing His praise! We reflect this beautiful pattern in our worship as we hear the Word and respond with songs of praise. Have the participants share a favorite hymn/anthem of praise and talk about specific verses or phrases that express their faith well. Some may love liturgical songs!

2. Verse 2 says, "I have heard of your fame." In verses 3-15 he recounts some of the glorious and powerful works of the Lord. Talk about the importance of retelling these accounts to our children and being familiar with Old Testament history.

Some of God's most majestic and awe-inspiring miracles happened long before Christ was born. God wanted these stories to be retold for generations to come so that His glory would be known to all people.

3. "I stand in awe of your deeds, O Lord. Renew them in our day." What a great prayer refrain for us to sing daily! What a great thought to fill our minds with as our day lingers on.
What stories do you think of most frequently?

Creation, the flood, history, parting of the Red Sea, or personal blessings? These are all good answers and things to think about!

4. It seems like a rapid succession of God's power in verses 3-15 then he abruptly stops in verse 16, overwhelmed at the Lord's might. Read that verse. Sometimes we are overcome with emotions in our spiritual life – and sometimes we aren't. Talk about that.

As much as some people make it seem that faith brings powerful emotional experiences, it is okay for us to realize that those moments aren't what make our faith real. If you've had a Habakkuk moment of awe - then praise God! But if you haven't, your praise to God is just as real and vibrant even though your lips didn't quiver. You can have emotional experiences in your faith life but that isn't what makes your faith real.

5. How much faith do you think it takes to say, "Yet, I will wait patiently for the day of calamity." Maybe you have said that or heard it from a loved one when the diagnosis of cancer comes. Perhaps it was a different tragedy. Sometimes we do know that hardships are ahead of us but Habakkuk is STILL singing! This is part of his praise! See how he overcomes his fear by recalling what a powerful God he has. What passages or thoughts from Scripture calm your fears?

Help the participants to see that we can always thank God for His grace, forgiveness, compassion and companionship in our lives. God never leaves us, He always loves us, His wisdom and power are beyond our grasp. There are countless answers!

6. Watch and listen as Habakkuk transitions from fear and awe to quiet trust in verses 17-18a. Imagine a change in the music from the booming glory of God's deeds to the soft meter of this reflection. What do you hear?

These verses reflect trust and hope when it cannot be seen. No buds on the trees or crops in the field; no sheep in the pen or cattle in the stalls – YET I will rejoice in the Lord. It sounds deep, peaceful and serene.

7. Now the final crescendo - rise in ovation for the glory of God! The Sovereign Lord IS my strength! The word "sovereign" reflects His all-encompassing rule, a perfect closing to Habakkuk's conversation with God about who is in control. Feel the Lord's sovereignty resonate like the crash of a cymbal! Then imagine lightness in the music like swift deer dancing on the rocks with ease and energy drawing us to see the true source of our power. It is God who enables us to love Him, God who daily gives us our ability to praise Him and live for His glory. God who brings us into His presence! Hallelujah! (Do you hear trumpets???). Make a comment.

8. What about Habakkuk's situation changed? What reminders and rebukes from God changed his heart and mind? What will you tuck away for future reference?

Nothing changed. The powerful words of God effectively encourage our hearts, bring hope to our souls and correct our thinking.

Closing prayer