

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Habakkuk: Upon the Rock”

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Habakkuk 1:12-2:20

July 14, 2024

I’m grateful to Pastor Mark for putting together this series through the minor prophet Habakkuk, a summer series we’ll be continuing through the month of July. If you were with us last week as we began this walk through Habakkuk, you’ll remember that Habakkuk is asking God questions that ring as true today as they did thousands of years ago. God, if you’re so good and so mighty, then why do these horrible things happen? The “problem of evil,” as it’s often called: the single most challenging question to face the Christian faith. In the opening words that we looked at last week, Habakkuk pointed to the physical violence and destruction he saw around him, and the Lord responded. And now his attention turns, not without some overlap, to a different kind of injustice: the exploitation of the righteous and the apparent prospering of the wicked, and then awaits the Lord’s response again. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, Habakkuk 1:12-2:20] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Will you pray with me? God of Justice and Mercy, we pray for your patience, that your patience would be ours, for truly there is much in the world we see that is not as it should be. Give us hearts to wait for the renewal and restoration of all things, and give us hands eager to work for them too. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

From the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, we heard Christ’s words: “Everyone, then, who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock.”

And if you grew up in the church and remember things from Sunday School as a child, as we read, you might have sung to yourself that little song, “The wise man built his house upon the rock, the wise man built his house upon the rock, the wise man built his house upon the rock, and the rains came tumblin’ down. The rains came down and the floods came up, the rains came down and the floods came up, the rains came down and the floods came up, but the house on the rock stood firm.” Then it repeats but instead with “The foolish man built his house upon the sand,” and so on, but then when the rains came down and the floods came up, what happens? “The house on the sand went splat.” It’s very poetic.

Embedded just within that children's Sunday School song is the hope, the trust that a life grounded upon the Word of our Lord will stand the trials and tribulations that inevitably come, while the alternative doesn't work out so well.

But what would happen if you saw others building their lives upon, well, any number of other things, upon "the sand," so to speak, and yet their houses stand firm, if not firmer and taller and grander, than yours?

That is a big part of the question Habakkuk brings in this passage. These first two chapters in Habakkuk can be considered in two cycles, roughly: a question or a complaint by the prophet, and God's response to it. We heard the first one last week, with Habakkuk focusing on the violence and destruction he was witnessing within the world, and in particular within Judah.

But then in the second one, the one that encompasses what we read today, though there's definitely some overlap, some mention of violence, this one seems to take on a more material lean. Hear those words again, starting in v. 13, this is the prophet praying to God: "Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing; why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?"

Now hear the imagery it raises next. "You have made people like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. The enemy brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net, he gathers them in his seine; so he rejoices and exults. Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his seine; for by them his portion is lavish, and his food is rich." The question, the complaint is that because of God's apparent indulgence of the treacherous, people are just like fish of the sea. Lawless, orderless, and the treacherous catch them up and use them to make their own portion lavish.

This is what Habakkuk is seeing: those who would exploit the people. Whether it was rulers, the wealthy, military leaders, or just other nations, he was seeing those whose abundance, whose livelihood, whose thriving was based on their willingness to fleece and exploit others. And by all appearances, they seemed to do quite well. In fact, one could be forgiven for thinking that such a person would be on much firmer ground to weather some kind of calamity precisely because they had gathered unto themselves more and more.

In other words, a house that by any measure would be labelled as "built upon the sand" seemed to be standing firm. And that runs counter to any sense of justice or righteousness or the promise of God's blessing and faithfulness to those who follow him.

There's a frustration here, isn't there? Maybe you've felt it. Think about it. Is there someone in your life, could be in your school, in your workplace, or even within your family that plays a bit loose with morals and ethical behavior, but then perhaps as a result of their dishonesty or their

cheating, they seem to get ahead. They enjoy success, academic, athletic, financial, material, social whatever label you want to put on it, success. And it can lead you to wonder, “Why am I just slogging it out, trying to do things ‘the right way’, when apparently there’s no penalty to doing otherwise?”

Some of you are familiar with the show *Breaking Bad*. If you’re not familiar, it’s about a chemistry teacher who becomes a drug dealer. You know, lighthearted stuff. Underneath all the plotting and double-crossing throughout it, there’s this pretty powerful morality tale.

At one point toward the end of the show, the main character Walter is trying to hold on to his empire after being found out. And another character named Jesse, who had been Walter’s partner throughout, turns on him and is confronted by the authorities, who tell him they can work together to bring Walter down. In a moment of frustration and desperation, describing all the horrible things Walter has done, Jesse cries out, “He can’t keep getting away with this!”

Now let’s not make this guy Jesse to be this moral paragon. He was a drug dealer too and at that moment he was about to burn a house down. But that cry, that desperate cry is something of what I think we hear from Habakkuk. “He can’t keep getting away with this!” If there is any justice, any law, any order that is actually at work within existence, someone like *that* should not be able to get ahead and stay ahead, and yet they do.

And then God responds. His response is the entirety of chapter two, so we can’t go in depth into all of it. But I’d ask you to notice one thing about what God conveys to the prophet. It’s not so much about the justice that will come in the end, like God finally setting things right when all wrongs shall be rectified. That’s a part of it, but more of it talks about the judgment upon the treacherous precisely because of their treachery, of the sort of fruit that bears.

Hear some of what it says. In v. 7 of chapter two, “Alas for you who heap up what is not your own!’ How long will you load yourselves with goods taken in pledge? Will not your own creditors suddenly rise,” then in the next verse, “Because you have plundered many nations, all that survive of the peoples shall plunder you.” In other words, if you exploit others, you set the stage for others to seek to exploit you, and one day they will.

Or in v. 16: “Alas for you who make your neighbors drink, pouring out your wrath until they are drunk, in order to gaze on their nakedness!’ You will be sated with contempt instead of glory. Drink, you yourself, and stagger!” You’ve taken advantage of your neighbors? You will not be satisfied. Contempt is what will fill you, not contentment.

Or maybe the most direct. Back in v. 4: “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith. Moreover, wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough.” In other words,

prophet, you look upon the treacherous and think they are satisfied? They are not. Their spirit is not right in them. They devour and devour and are never content. They are never whole.

Do you hear the message here? Such is the judgment, the curse upon those who profit and plunder on the exploitation of others. They reap and reap, but never rest.

I believe these words should come, on one hand, as a challenge, a warning. This declaration of the Lord isn't just limited to conquest or violence. It's about exploitation, in particular the exploitation of one's neighbor to enrich or advance yourself. It can be as broad as one nation plundering another, or it can be the small choices and temptations one makes. It's the desire to trip the kid next to you so you can win the race. It's the desire to sabotage your classmate's notebook or tablet or test, so you might rank higher. It's the desire to take advantage of another's compromised position or just their gullibility so that you might eke out a greater profit. There's a place for competition, there's a place for striving, but these are temptations we inevitably face, the choices that come little by little, the choices that make the difference between striving, truly striving with excellence in one's work, one's effort, and stepping on someone else's head in order to advance yourself.

These words come as a challenge to us every time we come to the point of temptation, when we think that making the easy choice, to cut the corner, to exploit someone else, will lead to our advancement, and that advancement will lead to our contentment. These words tell us, that is no way to peace. As it says, "Wealth is treacherous; the arrogant do not endure. They open their throats wide as Sheol; like Death they never have enough."

And I believe they should come, on the other hand, as a comfort. It's a comfort to anyone who has felt like the ways of the world work against them, that there's little purpose to seeking to live a faithful, principled life, or of working for a livelihood with excellence and integrity, to the glory of God, or of striving for the betterment and well-being of one's neighbor, rather than seeing them merely as tools for your own advancement.

Because, that's not always an easy path to hold to, especially as you see others seeming to "get ahead" by not playing by the same rules. It shouldn't come as coincidental that the Apostle Paul cites this passage in what is often considered the "thesis" of his great letter to the Romans, citing v. 4, "The righteous live by their faith."

It's an act of faith to build your house upon the rock, upon the Word of God. Because to align your life that way looks and feels different. It's trusting that the Lord will bring about justice.

It takes faith to believe that mercy will win out against vengeance.

It takes faith to believe that generosity and the honest striving of work will win out against greed.

It takes faith to believe that life, abundant life, a risen life, can somehow follow the cruelty of the cross.

That character Jesse, from that show *Breaking Bad*, didn't immediately get his own peace. He didn't immediately see justice either. He is essentially taken captive, and as if to illustrate the point made here, his own labor is exploited by those whom he used to exploit himself. But as he is imprisoned, he thinks not of mansions and cars and riches, but of a dream of his youth, in his shop, quietly going about his chosen labor of woodworking.

It takes faith to believe that that path, that path of quiet striving in the Lord, can lead to peace. Sometimes sadly it takes our seeing the other side of it.

But when the days come and we feel the frustration that the prophet feels here, when we want to cry out "They can't keep getting away with this!", when we look with envy upon those who have built their house upon the sand rather than the rock, may we hear the words of the Lord, who assures us that the day is coming: "For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay."

If it seems to tarry, if it seems to come slow, wait for it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.