

Trusting God’s Goodness (Habakkuk)



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Hab. 1:1–17, 2:2–4, Gal. 3:11, Heb. 11:1–13, Habakkuk 3, Phil. 4:11.*

Memory Text: “ ‘For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea’ ” (*Habakkuk 2:14, NASB*).

Key Thought: We may not understand always why tragedy happens, but we can trust God, no matter what.

After preaching about God’s abiding presence amid life’s adversities, a pastor was confronted by a woman who tearfully asked: “Pastor, where was God on the day when my only son died?” Reading a deep sorrow on her face the pastor was silent for a moment and then replied: “God was in the same place where He was on the day His only Son died to save us from the eternal death.”

Like us, Habakkuk witnessed injustice, violence, and evil. Even worse, God appeared to be silent amid it all, though He did ask Habakkuk to trust in His promises.

The prophet did not live to see the fulfillment of those promises; yet, he learned to trust in them anyway. His book begins with a complaint to God but ends with one of the most beautiful songs in the Bible. Like Habakkuk, we must wait in faith until the time when the world will be “filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 25.*

Perplexed Prophet

Read Habakkuk 1. What are the questions that the prophet asks of God? Though his situation is, of course, different from ours, how often do we find ourselves asking these types of questions?

Habakkuk is unique among prophets because he does not speak for God to the people but rather he speaks to God about the people. The prophet begins his struggle to understand God’s purposes with a cry of bewilderment: “O LORD, how long?” In the Bible, this question is typical of a lament (*Ps. 13:1, Jer. 12:4*). It implies a situation of crisis from which the speaker seeks deliverance.

The crisis about which Habakkuk calls for help is the violence that permeated his society. The original Hebrew word for “violence” is *hamas*, and it is used six times in Habakkuk’s book. The term implies acts of injury, both physical and moral, inflicted on others (*Gen. 6:11*).

Being a prophet, Habakkuk knows well how much God loves justice and hates oppression; so, he wants to know why God allows injustice to continue. All around he notices violence and law-breaking, and it seems that the wicked triumph over the righteous. Justice is being perverted by the powerful as it was in the time of Amos (*Amos 2:6–8*) and as it so often is today.

God’s answer reveals His future plans. He will use the army of Babylon to punish the people. This announcement surprises the prophet. He did not anticipate that God would use such a ruthless army to discipline Judah. In verse 8 the Babylonian cavalry are compared to a leopard, wolf, and eagle—three predators whose speed and power bring violent death to their prey.

Babylon’s ruthless arrogance acknowledges no accountability, seeks no repentance, and offers no reparations. It violates the most fundamental order of created life. However, God said that Babylon’s army will be used as a “rod of My anger” (*Isa. 10:5, NKJV*). The punishment will take place during Habakkuk’s lifetime (*Hab. 1:5*). This whole situation raises even more difficult questions about divine justice.

How can we learn to trust in God’s goodness and justice when the world seems so full of badness and injustice? What is our only recourse?

Living by Faith

In Habakkuk 1:12–17, God’s answer to Habakkuk’s questions poses an even more vexing question: can a righteous God use the wicked to punish those who are more righteous than they? Habakkuk’s question in verse 17 has to do with divine justice.

Habakkuk was puzzled, not only by the degeneration of his own people but also by the certainty that his country would be judged by another nation, one worse than his own. The prophet was well aware of Judah’s sins, but by any standards, his people, particularly the righteous among them, were not as wicked as the pagan Babylonians.

Read Habakkuk 2:2–4. What hope is presented there?

Habakkuk 2:2–4 is one of the most important passages in the Bible. Verse 4, in particular, expresses the essence of the gospel, the foundation of the verse that arguably started the Protestant Reformation. Through faith in Jesus Christ we receive God’s righteousness; we are credited with the righteousness of God Himself. His righteousness becomes ours. It is what is known as justification by faith.

Verse 4 is a summary statement of the way of salvation and of the biblical teaching about justification by faith. How did the New Testament writers use this verse? *Rom. 1:17, Gal. 3:11, Heb. 10:38.*

In the midst of all this turmoil and questions about evil, justice, and salvation, Habakkuk 2:4 presents a sharp contrast between the faithful and the proud. The conduct of each group determines its fate: the arrogant will fail while the righteous will live by faith. The original Hebrew word for *faith* (*’emuna*) is best rendered as “faithfulness,” “constancy,” and “dependability.” While the one who lives by faith is not saved by his works, his works show that he lives by faith. His faith is revealed in his works, and thus he is promised life eternal.

For the Earth Shall Be Filled (Habakkuk 2)

God’s answer to Habakkuk’s question in Habakkuk 1:17, as recorded in chapter 2, continues in the form of a song that mocks the proud oppressor. No less than five woes (*Hab. 2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19*) affirm the message that Babylon’s doom is sealed. The punishment on the enemy will be in accordance with the “measure for measure” principle.

What the wicked do to their victims will, in the end, be done to them. They will reap what they sow, because God cannot be mocked by proud human beings (*Gal. 6:7*).

In contrast to the oppressor, who is in the end judged by God, the righteous have the promise of eternal life in Christ, regardless of what happens to them here in this life. In describing the faithful remnant at the time of the end, the book of Revelation presents the expression “the patience of the saints” (*Rev. 14:12*). Indeed, the righteous are persistent in their wait for divine intervention, even if they see it only at the Second Coming.

Read Hebrews 11:1–13. How do these verses help us as we wrestle, in our own context, with the same questions with which Habakkuk struggled?

God’s ultimate answer to Habakkuk’s questions was the affirmation of His abiding presence. Trust in God’s presence and have confidence in His judgment in spite of the appearances to the contrary; that is the message of Habakkuk’s book, as well as the message of all biblical revelation. Prophetic faith is trust in the Lord and His unchanging character.

“The faith that strengthened Habakkuk and all the holy and the just in those days of deep trial was the same faith that sustains God’s people today. In the darkest hours, under circumstances the most forbidding, the Christian believer may keep his soul stayed upon the source of all light and power. Day by day, through faith in God, his hope and courage may be renewed.”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 386, 387.

Remembering God’s Fame

Read Habakkuk 3. What is Habakkuk doing there, and why is that so important, especially given the tough circumstances and difficult questions he is facing?

Habakkuk expresses his acceptance of God’s ways in a prayer set to music (*Hab. 3:19*). Being fully aware of God’s power, he asks the Lord to remember His mercy when the judgment begins. The prophet reverently recalls reports of God’s great acts in the past and prays to Him to bring redemption now. He seems to stand between times. With one eye he looks back to the Exodus event while with the other he looks ahead to the day of the Lord. He longs for a display of God’s power in his present situation.

The hymn from chapter 3 poetically describes God’s deliverance of Israel from the Egyptian bondage. What has happened at the time of the Exodus is a foreshadowing of the great judgment day. The godly should not be anxious about the day of the Lord, but they must wait, persevere, and rejoice in the hope that is theirs.

The hymn is also a celebration of the power, glory, and victorious nature of God. Habakkuk describes the Lord as sovereign over the whole earth. The revelation of His glory is comparable to the splendor of the sunrise (*Hab. 3:4*).

God judges the oppressive nations; yet, at the same time He brings about the redemption of His people in His “chariots of salvation” (*Hab. 3:8*). On the surface God’s power is not always visible, but the person of faith knows that God is there, no matter what.

Habakkuk calls us to look expectantly for the Lord’s salvation, when He will establish His righteousness on earth and fill the world with His glory. By singing praises to the Lord, the people of God encourage one another (*Eph. 5:19, 20; Col. 3:16*) to meditate on God’s past acts and to hope for the glorious future. Habakkuk’s own example demonstrates how one can persevere by living with a vision.

Dwell upon God’s past leading in your life. How does this past leading help you to learn to trust Him and His goodness, no matter what the immediate future brings? Why is it always so important to look to the ultimate and eternal future that awaits us?

God Is Our Strength

“Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food. . . . Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength; he will make my feet like deer’s feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills” (*Hab. 3:17–19, NKJV*).

What is so good about the prophet’s attitude here? How can we cultivate such an attitude for ourselves? *See also Phil. 4:11.*

The closing words in Habakkuk’s book (*Hab. 3:16–19*) express the prophet’s response to the revelation of God’s power and goodness. A fresh look at God’s saving acts sparks Habakkuk’s courage as he awaits the enemy’s attack. His fear stirs his innermost being as he waits for divine judgment to fall upon his nation. Invasion may result in the devastation of the fig and olive trees, so highly prized in Palestine, along with the equally needed vines, grain, and cattle. But the prophet’s staunch faith remains untouched because he has had a vision of the living Lord.

Based on his past experiences, Habakkuk knows of God’s absolute faithfulness. That is why he resigns himself to God’s present purposes (*Hab. 3:16–19*). In spite of all the unfavorable circumstances, the prophet is determined to place his trust in the Lord and in His goodness, no matter how hopeless his situation appears.

So, Habakkuk waits in faithful trust, even though there are no immediate signs of salvation. He is a prophet who, through dialogue, taunts, and a hymn of praise, has instructed the faithful over the ages to develop a deeper living faith in the Redeemer. By his own example, he encourages the godly to dialogue with God, to test their loyalty to Him in harsh times, to develop hope in the Lord, and to praise Him.

Habakkuk closes his book with a beautifully expressed attitude of faith: regardless of how hard life may become, one can find joy and strength in God. The underlying message of his book points to the need to wait patiently for God’s salvation in a period of oppression that has no visible end. The theme of “waiting on the Lord” dominates Habakkuk’s book. How especially relevant that theme should be for us, as Seventh-day Adventists, whose very name expresses our faith in the coming of Jesus.

Further Study: Read the following comments and discuss how they help us to understand better Habakkuk’s messages.

“There is an answer to Habakkuk’s question. It is an answer, not in terms of thought, but in terms of events. God’s answer will happen, but it cannot be spelled out in words. The answer will surely come; ‘if it seem[s] slow, wait for it.’ True, the interim is hard to bear; the righteous one is horrified by what he sees. To this the great answer is given: ‘The righteous shall live by his faith.’ It is an answer, again not in terms of thought, but in terms of existence. Prophetic faith is trust in Him, in Whose presence stillness is a form of understanding.”
—Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 143.

“We must cherish and cultivate the faith of which prophets and apostles have testified—the faith that lays hold on the promises of God and waits for deliverance in His appointed time and way. The sure word of prophecy will meet its final fulfillment in the glorious advent of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, as King of kings and Lord of lords. The time of waiting may seem long, the soul may be oppressed by discouraging circumstances, many in whom confidence has been placed may fall by the way; but with the prophet who endeavored to encourage Judah in a time of unparalleled apostasy, let us confidently declare, ‘The Lord is in His holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before Him.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 387, 388.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Summarize Habakkuk’s dialogue with God. What was his basic complaint? How did he respond to God’s answers?
- ❷ Could it be that, in God’s eyes, having honest questions and even doubts are a more acceptable religious attitude than a mere superficial belief? Justify your answer.
- ❸ Seventh-day Adventists of past generations all believed that Christ would have been back by now, and that they would have seen the ultimate fulfillment of all these wonderful promises. How do we learn to maintain faith as we, another generation, await His return?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Habakkuk 2:14*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Realize that bringing his or her perplexing questions to God is good, because when he or she struggles with Him, he or she learns from Him.

Feel: Be comforted to know that while he or she may be discouraged in looking around, looking up brings hope.

Do: Learn to honestly present to God his or her perplexing questions, arguments, and complaints. In this way, He can change his or her attitudes, feelings, and reasoning.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: God Welcomes Complaints

A Why is it as important for us as it was for biblical authors to communicate with God openly, honestly, and sincerely?

B Why is it so difficult to wait for God's justice?

C Discuss: Is it helpful to share our complaints with others, or is it better to share them with God? Give reasons for your answer.

II. Feel: Trusting God in Times of Delay

A How can trust in the Lord provide strength and build us up?

B Why is it so important to protect the righteous?

C How can we avoid feeling depressed when the Lord delays in answering our questions?

III. Do: Open and Honest Prayers

A Why should we tell God our feelings of frustration and present our perplexing questions?

B How can we help people to be open with God?

C How can we help doubting Seventh-day Adventists to live with unanswered questions?

► **Summary:** Justice is an important ingredient in life and must always be balanced with love. Only a true knowledge of God's purposes as revealed in His Word can help us to trust Him in spite of tragedies and delayed answers.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Habakkuk 3:17, 18*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: We, like Habakkuk, live in a broken world, a world of pain and injustice that begs the question not only of God’s existence but about who He is and what He is like. Habakkuk 3:17, 18 sums up Habakkuk’s struggle of faith. As a result of his dialogue with God, he is inspired to look beyond his present conditions and reaffirm his faith in God’s goodness.

Just for Teachers: Use one of the opening activities below to explore the ways in which the book of Habakkuk role-plays the cycle of faith, doubt, and renewed faith in circumstances in which our experience seems impossible to reconcile with our spiritual beliefs.

Opening Activities:

1 Engage with your class about how the story of Habakkuk mirrors/differs from the story of Job. In what ways do these stories help us to further understand how to deal with difficult questions when faced with injustice, particularly with undeserved suffering?

2 Elicit personal examples of spiritual crises that add dimension to understanding this week’s study.

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Just for Teachers: In looking at the content and structure of this week’s study, the following elements in the biblical account may prove to be useful starting points for deepening spiritual insights into Habakkuk’s story.

Bible Commentary

I. The Book of Habakkuk: Backdrop and Structure (*Review Habakkuk 1:2–4 with your class.*)

The book of Habakkuk belongs to a turbulent era in the history of the Jewish people during which time the balance of power was shifting from the Assyrians to the Babylonians. Assyria's domination came to an end with the destruction of its capital city, Nineveh, by the invading Babylonians in 612 B.C. Less than twenty years after Habakkuk had written his book, the Babylonians also destroyed Jerusalem and carried the leading citizens of Judah into captivity (<http://www.ovrln.com/outlinesofbooks/Habbakkuk.html>). It is within this context, and with this situation as a backdrop, that Habakkuk cries out to God, taking on the following narrative structure:

- Habakkuk's First Complaint: Why does the evil in Judah go unpunished? (*Hab. 1:2–4*).
- God's Answer: The Babylonians will punish Judah (*Hab. 1:5–11*).
- Habakkuk's Second Complaint: How can a just God use wicked Babylonia to punish a people more righteous than it? (*Hab. 1:12, 2:1*).
- God's Answer: Babylonia will be punished, and faith will be rewarded (*Hab. 2:2–20*).
- Habakkuk's Prayer: After asking for manifestations of God's wrath and mercy (as he has seen in the past), he closes with a confession of trust and joy in God (*Habakkuk 3*; <http://www.biblestudytools.com/habakkuk/>).

Although very condensed, Habakkuk's story teaches at least three vital truths. First, the story reveals that struggling with doubt may be part of the Christian experience. Second, it demonstrates God's openness to Habakkuk's (and our) questioning. And last, its very structure is a template for the ways in which Christians can actually deepen their faith in moments of doubt.

Consider This: What is the backdrop to the book of Habakkuk, and how does that structure serve to frame and shape his questions and struggle? How does Habakkuk's struggle, in turn, frame or structure his narrative? What are the three vital truths that the Habakkuk story teaches?

II. Habakkuk's Complaint and God's Response Are Important (*Review Habakkuk 1:1–4 with your class.*)

There is certainly something universal about Habakkuk's lamentations that injustice is rampant in his world. Today it seems, more than ever, that the righteous are surrounded by the wicked, the law is powerless, and God doesn't seem to care about the plight of His people (*Hab. 1:1–4*). Habakkuk wonders why God is allowing these things to happen. It seems as if Habakkuk lives in 2013, doesn't it?

Many of us look around the world or at our lives and see the absence of God and His justice. As the story of Habakkuk reveals, not only should we turn to God with our dilemmas and questions, but it is within these moments that the very character of God is revealed. The fact that God allows Himself to be questioned by one of His followers provides a valuable insight into His nature. Our God is a responsive God, who welcomes questions and is willing and able to provide us with answers, even when the answers are difficult to deliver (for example, He tells Habakkuk that the justice He seeks may take a while in coming). The content of God's response to Habakkuk also contains a lasting spiritual message, which is that God reaffirms His principles of justice. He reveals that while His timing for this justice may not fit into our preferred timelines, God's timing is perfect.

The sequence of doubt/questioning/engagement with God in the story of Habakkuk is rounded out by the prophet's final embrace of God's faithfulness and goodness. The triumph of his faith, even though conditions around him have not changed, speaks to God's promise that He will provide us with both understanding and answers sufficient to our need. Also, it bears an important lesson, which is to be open to answers that are outside of our expectation.

Consider This: What truth about God do Habakkuk's questions reveal to us?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: For the applied learning section of this week's study, pose the following thought questions to your class. The purpose of these questions will be to find practical ways in which to incorporate elements of Habakkuk's truths into personal and church life.

Thought Questions:

1 How do we engage in a dialogue with God? For most, God does not speak to us in the spoken word as though He were right next to us in human flesh. Yet, we believe He speaks to us. What are His methods, and how do we test the responses we receive to ensure that they are from Him?

2 How do we live in faith in a confusing world? Even though we know that suffering will continue while there is sin in the world, what should our

response to that be? Habakkuk outlines what we should do when our faith is weak, but how should we respond to suffering when our faith is strong?

Activity: Ask your students to spend some time in conversation or in silence, reflecting on the questions posed above. Also, you can encourage your class members to write down some thoughts in a small brainstorming session and request that volunteers share them. What ideas can be acted upon either by the church community, by your Sabbath School class, or by individuals? In what ways can these ideas be implemented?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: Students can leave this week’s class with tools to answer their own/other’s questions: (1) Is God there? (2) Does God care? and (3) Is God fair? Understanding that these are recurring questions in the Christian walk, what are the unique ways in which people can engage these questions in order to deepen their faith journey and their understanding of God?

Activity: For people who journal, blog, take pictures, make videos, and so on, think about the ways in which these questions can be explored in your creative pursuits. Using these spiritual questions as a focal point for your writing or art may open up new understanding about yourself and God.

Consider enlarging the conversation to include others who may be struggling with these same questions. Engaging with them in a series of respectful dialogue sessions may be an interesting way of building bridges within your community, and such sessions may reveal that the problem of pain/Habakkuk’s problem is one of the issues most problematic to those in your community as well. Think of potential former members who have left the church because of doubt. What can be done to reach out to them? How can their struggle with doubt—and your embracing of their struggle as valid and as indicative of their serious engagement with difficult issues—be something that connects them back to a community of faith rather than estranges them?