

HABAKKUK

*How long, O Lord,
must I call for help?*

FAITH IN THE SILENCE

(4 BIBLE STUDIES)

EXAMINATION
BIBLE STUDIES

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THE SMALL PRINT

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Your Commitment

I would encourage you to make a commitment to attending your group regularly. I realise that sometimes there are things that get in the way, but do prioritise studying the Bible with other. This will involve sacrifice, and effective use of your time, but I really believe that in doing so you will get the most out of studying the Bible and praying together in your small group.

Your Contribution

What you put into the group is going to determine what you get out of the group. I encourage you to contribute honestly to the discussion and workings of the group. I understand people come from different backgrounds with unique personalities & life experiences. But, we all have a big part to play, so I encourage you to be fully present and take ownership of your group.

Your Preparation

These materials are primarily for use in preparing and/or leading group discussions, but they will also be useful in keeping your thoughts together in one place. The materials provide you with the passage so that you can identify and highlight recurring themes and note down your own thoughts and questions. Also, the materials include questions designed to provoke thought, and help you reflect on what the passage meant, both at the time it was written, and also what it means for us now.

I would encourage you to make good use of these materials, as doing so will help you contribute and get the most out of the group discussions. The materials are, however, only “tools” – they are there to help you, and not to restrict you, or force you to think in a certain manner. I want to see God speaking to you through these passages, and if the questions or notes don't help you, simply don't use them!

I have also included within these materials an introduction to the book. Make of this what you will, but I hope that it is helpful in getting you started with these studies!

Your Leadership

Here are some useful pointers in how to lead your Bible study group. Be aware that included in this study guide are more questions than you can possibly ask and/or answer in one session. They are not designed to be used rigidly, and there will rarely be a need to ask every question! Make sure that you spend some time praying at the start and ensure you read & re-read the passages as much as possible. In relation to the passages, then consider the suggested questions with an open mind. There is rarely “a single right answer” and I would encourage you to share your thoughts with your group.

I have also included a number of quotations from relevant Christian literature, most of which are readily available online if you want to do further thinking or study. My prayer is that as you study together you would grow to love Jesus and experience Him more deeply.

I would appreciate your feedback and suggestions on how to make these materials even better!

*Steve McClure
Spring 2019*

INTRODUCING HABAKKUK

Habakkuk lived towards the end of the monarchy in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Most place it towards the start of the 11year reign of King Jehoiakim (King from 609-598 BC), though some place it at the end of Josiah's 31year reign (640-609BC). Jehoiakim was a king who had no regard for justice or mercy, resulting in widespread oppression, injustice and violence among the people in Judah and Jerusalem. You can read more about these times in 2 Kings 23:36-24:7. It was during a time anticipating the impending invasion of the Babylonians, who attacked Jerusalem in 587BC.

We do not know anything about Habakkuk other than the fact he was a prophet. His prophecies are not dated. His prophecy shows that he was zealous for God and deeply concerned about his people's disobedience toward God. It therefore gives us a window into Habakkuk's prayer life, making it a unique prophecy. Habakkuk (like Jeremiah) most likely lived to see the attack of Jerusalem in 597BC by the Babylonians.

The prophecy of Habakkuk stems from a complaint made by the prophet regarding God's apparent inactivity on the subject of wickedness and injustice. Habakkuk feels that that he has been calling out to God for help and crying out to God about the violence all around Him (1:2). God, he says, had not listened and had not moved to save them. He felt that God was ignoring injustice, violence and wrongdoing (1:3). This is of course an age old question that has been a real struggle for many. Habakkuk however seems to engage God in dialogue on the matter and God's responses, though surprising, help lead Habakkuk to a place of faith and trusting in Him.

God's first answer is to say that He is going to do something in their time that no-one would believe. He is going to exert His judgement on them, but not in the way they might have expected. God is going to send the ruthless and wicked Babylonians to judge His people. How could God, who is "too pure to look on evil" (1:13), use a nation like this "to execute judgment" (1:12) on a people "more righteous than themselves" (1:13)? In His second response God makes clear that Babylon too will receive their comeuppance and face His judgement. God presents a series of five woes against this ruthless nation.

*¹⁶I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. ¹⁷Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the sheepfold and no cattle in the stalls, ¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. ¹⁹The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights. **Habakkuk 3:16-19***

Ultimately Habakkuk finds himself in a place where he can patiently trust God. This is of course the charge on the righteous who God says will live by faith. The prophecy ends with a song of praise written by Habakkuk, reflecting back on God's goodness through the generations. Habakkuk is able to wait patiently for God to act and may well have seen Jerusalem fall to the Babylonians. He is able to rejoice in God and be joyful in God His Saviour.

Steve McClure
Spring 2019

STUDY 1 – HABAKKUK 1:1-11 – UNPUNISHED WICKEDNESS

INTRODUCTION: Habakkuk begins his prophecy with a complaint against God: namely that the evil he is seeing around him appears to go unpunished. This is an age old question which Habakkuk takes to God and from whom is given an answer that he really did not expect!

SETTING THE SCENE: What sorts of questions are people asking today about violence, injustice and wickedness in our world? What kind of answers to people give to these questions and how would you evaluate those answers? To what extent can you identify with such questions for yourself?

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HABAKKUK'S 1ST COMPLAINT (v1-4): What is the essence of the complaint that Habakkuk makes to the Lord? What insights does it give to how Habakkuk was thinking? What do you imagine that Habakkuk hopes to gain by getting an answer?

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WHY LORD? Have you ever found yourself asking 'How long Lord' (v2) or 'Why Lord' (v3)? What might this look like for us? To what extent would you say that it is or isn't OK to question God in this way? At what point does our questioning become accusatory?

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THE PARALYSIS OF THE LAW (v4): What is the purpose of the law? What does Habakkuk mean when he says that the law is paralysed and why does it lead to a perversion of justice?

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WHERE ARE YOU GOD? Why is it that God at times *seems* to hide or withdraw? Contrast the two statements below written from different viewpoints: to what extent can you identify with one or both?

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1

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*Our God is an ever absent help in times of trouble. **Anonymous***
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GOD'S RESPONSE (v5-11): What is the essence of God's response to Habakkuk's complaint? To what degree would you say that God answers his complaint and why? How much of a shock factor do you think that God's answer would have had for Habakkuk?

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BRUTAL BABYLON: How does it make you feel that God would punish the people using the fearful, ruthless and evil Babylonians? Why do you think God would raise up the Babylonians for this task against His own people?

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THIRST FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS: This chapter shows us that Habakkuk longed for righteousness. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matt 5:6). How has God made it possible for us to be filled?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How has what we have read so far helped answer the question of whether the injustice we see in the world (past and present) is compatible with a God of love?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Share your honest struggles with some of these huge questions of life? Seek God together and ask Him to help you respond in faith. Pray also for your friends who might well be struggling with questions like this.

MEMORY VERSE: HABAKKUK 1:5

STUDY 2 – HABAKKUK 1:12-2:5 – LIVE BY FAITH

INTRODUCTION: Having heard that God does intend to act and punish God's people Habakkuk now responds with a second complaint about the instrument God has chosen to use against them: namely the Babylonians. God's response is to tell him to live by faith and trust in Him.

SETTING THE SCENE: Isaiah 55 says that God's ways and God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts: share some of things that you have experienced where you struggle to understand God's unfathomable ways? Why is it so important not to jump to conclusions in these things?

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APPROACHING GOD (1:12): What credit can we give to Habakkuk for how he approaches God and what he says about God and His purposes? Why is this an important basis to make his complaint?

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HOW LORD (v13)? What problem did God's answer raise for Habakkuk? Does this suggest that God has double standards or that the wicked prosper? In what sense did Habakkuk have too small a perspective of God's purposes and how can we do the same?

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Why is it so tempting to compare ourselves to others like Habakkuk does here? What do Romans 3:10-12 & 22-23 have to say about our natural inclination to justify ourselves in comparison to others?

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WRESTLING WITH GOD'S PURPOSES (v14-17): What do these verses (esp. the imagery of Babylon as a Fisherman) imply about how he was feeling? How and when are we tempted to feel the same? How is Babylon's continued treachery opposed to Habakkuk's understanding of God's character?

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STANDING AT WATCH (2:1): What attitude does this verse suggest that we should adopt when perplexed at God's dealings? What does it look like to watch and wait for God? How do we see something of Habakkuk's faith here both in what he says and what he doesn't say?

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TO BE PASSED ON (v2): In His second response why does God emphasise that Habakkuk should make it 'plain' on tablets so that it might be passed on? In what ways are we like a herald today for God's urgent message? What is the implication of this plainness to how we share our faith?

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AN APPOINTED TIME (v3): What is the appointed time that Habakkuk speaks of in 2v3? How can we make the most of God's patience in delaying judgment (which will be awful for those who do not know Christ - 2 Thessalonians 1v6-9)? How can we remember that God's timing is always perfect?

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LIVING BY FAITH (v4): How are the righteous to live, and how might that be reflected in their priorities and desires? This verse is quoted in Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11 & Hebrews 10:38: how do these references help us to understand further what it means to live by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7)?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How would you summarise the journey that God is taking Habakkuk on to help him to walk with Him in faith whilst wrestling with his questions? What can we learn from this?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God that He is Sovereign and in control of all of our lives. Ask God to help you walk by faith as you wrestle with difficult questions about what is happening all around you.

MEMORY VERSE: HABAKKUK 2:4

STUDY 3 – HABAKKUK 2:5-20 – TAUNTING WOES

INTRODUCTION: God's told Habakkuk that He has an answer but he is going to need to wait. In that waiting the righteous are those who live by faith in God's promises and His faithfulness. As Habakkuk waits for God's deliverance this passage sets things in their proper perspective.

SETTING THE SCENE: When has knowing the *big picture* helped you to cope with all that is going on in the *everyday detail* of life? How would you describe faith in terms of the tension between *the seen* and the *unseen*? What do you think would help you to live more by faith?

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A WARNING TO THE PROUD AND GREEDY (v5): How do you understand the warning of v5 in relation to that context and to what follows? Why is wine a traitor? What characterises an arrogant man who is never at rest? How do we see these attitudes displayed in the world today?

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THE FIVE WOES (v6-20): What is the *overall message* of what is being communicated through these five "woes" (see list below)? What can we learn from these five woes and what might be a modern day equivalent for each one?

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1. WOE TO THE PLUNDERERS (v6-8): How does God show that His Sovereignty and justice will catch up with Babylon? When are we ever tempted to do things, which are at the expense of others?

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2. WOE TO THOSE SEEKING SECURITY (v9-11): How do you understand God's words that the very stones (through which they had built their empire), would cry out and haunt them? In what ways are we also preoccupied with the search for security?

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3. WOE TO THOSE PURSUING BLOODSHED (v12-14): Why will their labour turn out to be only fuel for the fire and how instead will the earth be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD? How would you evaluate the goals that we are pursuing and the things that are important to us?

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4. WOE TO THOSE WHO SHAME OTHERS (v15-18): How was God going to turn the tables on those determined to shame and humiliate others and bring that shame down upon them? In what ways might we also be looking to glorify ourselves and to shame others?

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5. WOE TO THOSE WHO TRUST IN IDOLS (v19): Why is idolatry (anything that takes the place of God in our lives) such a nonsense compared to worshipping the one true God? What are the idols in our lives? What is close to our hearts and the things we devote our time, energy and money to?

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THE GLORY OF THE LORD (v14, 20): What is significant about what v14 & 20 (Psalm 11:4) say about the nature and character God? What can we imply about Habakkuk's declaration that all the earth be silent before God? How might these help Habakkuk (and us) to live by faith?

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How does a passage like this help you to trust in God's sovereign plan for His creation even when it feels like He is not at work? In what ways do you think that God's response answers Habakkuk's complaints?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Thank God that He is in control and always will be. Pray into the substance of these woes and ask God to help you seek Him rather than any of these things.

MEMORY VERSE: HABAKKUK 2:14

STUDY 4 – HABAKKUK 3 – A PSALM OF PRAISE

INTRODUCTION: After Habakkuk obeys God and gets his time in silence and reflection (see 2:20 – the whole earth is silent before God), what comes out of his heart then is a song in chapter 3. This is a great insight into where God has led him – to a place of trusting Him.

SETTING THE SCENE: Think of a time when you have wrestled at length with something difficult in your life and answer the following questions about it: Where did you begin? What was the process that you went on? What did the characteristics of the final place of resolution?

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REPEAT THEM IN OUR DAY (v2): What has made Habakkuk stand in awe of God's deeds? What do you think that Habakkuk meant by his prayer that God repeat His deeds in their day? What exactly was he asking God to do? How can we open our eyes to see God at work in unimaginable ways?

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What does Habakkuk mean by "in wrath remember mercy"? How are God's wrath and mercy related? In what situations do you think we should be praying this also?

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POWER AND JUDGEMENT (v3-7): How do you trace the progression of Habakkuk's thought process in these verses (notice the references to the Exodus here)? How do we see God's power and judgement at work in these verses? In what ways is remembering what God has done in the past important to the process of putting our faith in God? How can we see God at work in our own lives?

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WRATH AND SUBMISSION (v8-15): How do these verses help us understand God's wrath poured out against the enemies of Israel (notice the war imagery in v8, 9, 11 & 14)? With God's exploits as their Divine warrior in the past (esp. Exodus, Sinai & the conquest) how are these verses a picture of how Habakkuk sees God working in the future?

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THE LORD IS MY STRENGTH (v16-19): How does Habakkuk appear emotionally, physically and spiritually here? Is our experience of meeting God in prayer like the one that Habakkuk had here (v16)? How hard is it to say the kind of things that Habakkuk says here?

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REMEMBERING GOD'S GOODNESS: When and how has God worked in your past that remembering, gives you confidence for tomorrow and/or for the situations you find yourself in?

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GOD'S ULTIMATE VICTORY: The Babylonians received God's judgment in 539BC (perhaps up to 60 years later than this prophecy): what is the ultimate victory that this prophecy looks toward? If you have time try contrasting this chapter with Revelation 6.

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DRAWING IT TOGETHER: How does Habakkuk come to a fresh understanding of how God acts and how hopelessness can be transformed by God's fresh intervention in affairs? How has Habakkuk's faith been strengthened and how have we been changed through studying it?

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IDEAS FOR PRAYER: Pray together asking God to once again repeat His great deeds of the past to bring justice to the oppressed and glory to Himself. Ask God to help you respond to Habakkuk's prophecy in the spirit of faith expressed in verses 16-19.

MEMORY VERSES: HABAKKUK 3:17-18

MEMORY VERSES

WEEK 1: HABAKKUK 1 – UNPUNISHED WICKEDNESS

⁵Look at the nations and watch –and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.

Habakkuk 1:5

WEEK 2: HABAKKUK 2 – LIVE BY FAITH

⁴See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not upright – but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness.

Habakkuk 2:4

WEEK 3: HABAKKUK 2 – TAUNTING WOES

¹⁴For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Habakkuk 2:14

WEEK 4: HABAKKUK 3 – A PSALM OF PRAISE

¹⁷Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the sheepfold and no cattle in the stalls, ¹⁸yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.

Habakkuk 3:17-18