

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

Lesson 4, Chapter 2 Continued

In our previous lesson we just barely got into Habakkuk chapter 2. Verse 1 represents one of the most profound statements I have ever encountered in the Bible. It is something that at some point in our walk as Believers perhaps each of us can sincerely think it, say it, and live by it.

CJB Habakkuk 2:1 *I will stand at my watchpost; I will station myself on the rampart. I will look to see what [God] will say through me and what I will answer when I am reproved.*

In so many ways it is the companion statement in Psalms that tells us:

CJB Psalm 37:7 *Be still before Yehoveh; wait patiently till he comes.*

On the one hand, how can we see the Prophet Habakkuk as anything but a complainer who is impatient for God to act? But on the other, he remains faithful such that he knows... even if he isn't feeling it... that the righteous God-Worshipper is urged to wait patiently, and be on the watch, for when God does answer. For many of us, this might be the hardest thing we could ever do. And, like Habakkuk, we'll likely never become so devoted to God that we'll actually feel comfortable and calm about carrying it out for too long.

So, as we saw in chapter 1, and as we'll see throughout chapters 2 and 3, we have a conflicted Habakkuk. Why? Because that's the condition of a God-Worshipper including those who trust in Yeshua. He's a human being. Being given even such a lofty status as a God-chosen Prophet doesn't remove that part of him that is inherent in his fallen human nature. God uses nothing but fractured, even broken, vessels to deliver His oracles because that's all He has to work with.

Let's begin today's study by re-reading all of chapter 2.

RE-READ HABAKKUK CHAPTER 2

We left off at verse 2, when after some unknown amount of time that Habakkuk had waited, he finally received an answer to His prayer of lament and complaint. I spoke about how this verse alluded to Deuteronomy 27:8, because in both passages God told His Prophets (first Moses, now Habakkuk) to write down what He is showing them on tablets.

In an era when very little was ever written down... when oral transmission of nearly all information and communicate was the mode 99% of the time... this could only mean that what was going to be memorialized was to be remembered, repeated, and obeyed for as long as humans roamed the earth. It was something that everyone needs to know. It was not modifiable; it would not erode or fade away. In fact, in Western culture to this day when we speak of something that is indelible and immutable we say, "it is written in stone".

I also spoke to about how what Habakkuk received from God was in a vision; it was not audible the way it always seemed to be for Moses. And, that the core principle of a vision was that most often it was not like a series of images that showed the events that God was telling His Prophet about, instead it was rather of God as the storyteller sitting on His heavenly throne and surrounded by other heavenly beings. Sometimes we are told that these were the **elohim** that formed His Divine Council; other times it will speak of the Host of Heaven surrounding Him. While I cannot say it with certainty, I think this is but 2 ways of expressing essentially the same thing.

So, this vision comes with 2 imperatives: memorialize it for all time by writing it on stone, and act upon it swiftly in obedience! Now, we should not take everything that comes beginning with verse 3 as the actual vision. That is, we have 2 different situations that are being talked about. There is the vision God will give Habakkuk, and then there are these words of chapter 2 that are essentially continuing the conversation. I acknowledge that it might be that chapter 3 contains something of that vision, but even then, I'm not certain about it. So, some of that vision is either recounted in chapter 3 or we currently have no surviving record of it.

How one thinks about this issue can then have a bearing on the words of verse 2. We just read that verse as interpreted according to the CJB, so here it is in the more literal YLT.

YLT Habakkuk 2:2 *And Jehovah answereth me and saith: 'Write a vision, and explain on the tables, That he may run who is reading it.'*

My focus is on the words, “**that he** may run who is reading it”. The NAS does the best job, however, in bringing this across in a way that modern English speakers would say it.

NAS Habakkuk 2:2 *“... ,that the one who reads it may run.”*

What is probably being said here is that Habakkuk is to run to “proclaim” this message. The Hebrew is **qore bo**. This term is used elsewhere in the Bible including Exodus 34:6 and it means to proclaim something in the name of the Lord. So, there is some ambiguity here, but either way one takes it, the oracle Habakkuk receives is to be quickly distributed and it is also to be recorded as a permanent record. Verse 3, then, plays on the idea of swiftness.

CJB Habakkuk 2:3 *For the vision is meant for its appointed time; it speaks of the end, and it does not lie. It may take a while, but wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.*

In the way our human minds operate, waiting for something to come in an indeterminate future hardly seems compatible with the idea of swiftness or quickness. But, for God, it is not that way at all.

This verse lends more credence to the notion that whatever the vision imparted, it is either not contained in the remainder of Habakkuk’s book, or some of it might well be in what we call chapter 3. Further, whatever its content, it will come about later. The Hebrew word used is **mo’ed** and it is regularly used in the Torah to mean “appointed time”. It has a double meaning. On the one hand, it means it is an indeterminate time that God has chosen. On the other (as with the 7 biblical feasts and the sabbath), it means a most specific time that God has determined and revealed. When it concerns

an event, the event is usually given a formal name like Passover or Unleavened Bread or Shabbat. In this case, it is the former... it is for a time in the future God has yet to reveal. God says that this vision Habakkuk received would happen at "the end".

Christians immediately think of what today is popularly called The End Times. The Apocalypse. The War of Armageddon and such. That's because how prophecies actually work is rarely acknowledged in Christian circles, because to uphold their doctrines requires a most specific way for prophecies to occur.

Generally speaking, Christian doctrines require a one-time fulfillment of prophecy. Yet, biblically, that is not the case at all. Prophecies rarely happen one-time and most usually they happen twice. Sometimes it can be as much as 3 times. The reason Christian scholars, teachers and pastors get it wrong is because they usually only consider what the New Testament says, and disregard obvious Old Testament fulfillments that don't fit an already decided agenda.

The idea of "latter days" and "the end" are a matter of historic perspective. There are a few "latter days" and "the ends" mentioned in the Old Testament, and some of it overflows into the New Testament. For Habakkuk, what the future disposition of Judah will be, as well as what role the Chaldeans (the Babylonians) will play, would happen in the "latter days" at the time of "the end". For him, however, the fulfillment of this prophecy begins when the Babylonians invade, conquer, and then finally exile most Judeans to Babylon (be aware that the first invasion did not conquer all of Judah, a subsequent one did, and a final one ended with a very irritated Babylonian King punishing Judah by uprooting many of the Judeans and sending them to Babylon in exile).

This fulfillment by the Chaldeans upon Judah would take place less than 10 years into Habakkuk's future; and unless he died (which, we have no record of) he witnessed it and was caught up in it. He may well have been one of the many scores of thousands of Judeans to be deported and sent to Babylon to live out his days. And yet, several hundred years later there would be second fulfillment, only this time by the Romans. Jews, after the return from Babylon,

and even during the time of Christ who still believed in prophecy, were looking at yet another “latter days” or “the end” fulfillment. But, for them, this also involved a Messiah. And, indeed, it happened. But what they could not have known is that a third fulfillment would come... the same fulfillment we are all waiting upon in the 21st century. The final fulfillment when God broadens the scope of it to be worldwide and elevates it to be almost destructive of the entire earth. For us, from our historical perspective, this is the “latter days” or “the end”. All are legitimate fulfillments and each happened, and will happen, somewhat differently according to time, culture, technology, etc.

Habakkuk was not in any way thinking that the time God appointed was in terms of thousands of years, not even in hundreds. The future appointed time God told Him about ranged from a few years to perhaps as much as a few decades in his mind... but that would have been the extent of it. And his thinking of it would prove to be correct. Other later biblical writers eventually learned that God would act, it would be as He said, but when (precisely) remained only for Him to know.

CJB 2 Peter 3:9 ***The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some people think of slowness; on the contrary, he is patient with you; for it is not his purpose that anyone should be destroyed, but that everyone should turn from his sins.***

The next words of this verse “it doesn’t lie” are speaking of the vision. That is, the vision is correct and it will happen as foretold, regardless of how long before it is fulfilled. On the other hand, “it will not delay”. That is, from God’s perspective it will happen exactly when it is supposed to happen. The bottom line to this verse is this: the oppressors (Babylon) are doomed without hope. Yehoveh will come just as He has done in the past, and He will bring judgment on those oppressors. Yet, Judah is not immune, either. They, too, will experience some woes for their rebellion. But, while Babylon will be utterly destroyed, a remnant of Judah will continue. Beyond that, there is little detail at this point.

CJB Habakkuk 2:4 ***"Look at the proud: he is inwardly not upright; but the righteous will attain life through trusting faithfulness.***

On my, what a pivotal verse! Before we get to that, I want to mention that many good language scholars think it best to connect verses 4 and 5 together as an intended one, long statement. I can see that point of view. Nevertheless, I'll address them separately because while I see verse 5 as playing off of verse 4, I don't see the 2 verses together as one long thought.

Those pivotal words I spoke of form the last half of verse 4, and we're going to spend a little time with it after we examine the first half. Essentially, it is with verse 4 that the prophetic part of the oracle begins. A fundamental thought is presented: the outwardly proud are inwardly not upright. Once again, to give a little more nuance to this verse, I want to give you the more literal translation.

YLT Habakkuk 2:4 *Lo, a presumptuous one! Not upright is his soul within him, And the righteous by his steadfastness liveth.*

This statement has the characteristics of a law, a promise, and a proverb all rolled into one. I think I'd like to call it a divine principle. It is foundational to how one has a relationship with God, in contrast to how one sets himself against God. While the Chaldeans are not specifically called out, certainly they are the symbolic representatives and the immediate possessors of being the proud and presumptuous one. History proves that the Babylonians were the ones to first fulfill this prophecy; but they won't be the last. Nonetheless, however many will be the fulfillments of this prophecy (I think 3 in total), those that align themselves against God bear those attributes of being proud and their souls not upright. The opposite of that is the righteous. So, this sets the **lo yashar** (those who are **not** upright), against the **tsaddiq** (the upright). What is also interesting is where or who the source for this lack of uprightness exists. And notice: God does not blame Satan. Flip Wilson's famous "the devil made me do it" is nowhere present in this thought. It is the human, himself, where the problem lies.

The place within a human where this presumptuousness lives is here translated to English as the soul. It uses the Hebrew word **nephesh**. **Nephesh** has a wide range of meaning; from indicating a living being, to the seat of our emotions, to the center of life, to what gives a person their sense

of self, or (as here) it is translated as soul. In my opinion, that range of meaning is so broad that to reduce it all (or perhaps to combine all those attributes) to the word “soul”, makes “soul” nearly indefinable. I have spoken before how the word **elohim** was proclaimed by interpreters as meaning “God”. I don’t accept that because of the way it is used in the Bible. Rather, it is one of those ancient words that much later Bible scholars had a great deal of trouble ascertaining exactly what it did mean in the mind of the Hebrews that spoke and wrote it. They decided they could use the word “God” to not disturb their long-standing Church doctrines, and Judaism essentially determined the same for the sake of their long-established traditions.

Nephesh is the same, in my view. It is almost a nebulous catch word for trying to define the intangible and invisible element of humans where the uniqueness of what makes us human, resides. Something that is quite mysterious and difficult for us to wrap our minds around, so just as difficult to give it a simple label. If I were to choose a word or phrase to use instead of soul, perhaps it might be “the essence of that person’s inner being.” Naturally, that’s too long to write in our Bibles, nonetheless I think that is the thought pattern that the Hebrew people had... and perhaps continue to have... about the soul.

To use modern terms that are more often used, what this verse is doing is contrasting the unrighteous against the righteous. But now, we have to deal with another term that is taken for granted and I’m not sure I have ever heard anyone try to supply a concrete meaning. That term is righteous. Essentially, it means to be in the right as opposed to being in the wrong. The Hebrew thought of antiquity was “to be straight” as opposed “to be crooked”. Thus, the word **tsaddiq** in its various forms means righteous, and it can be used as an adjective or an adverb. It can describe the inner state of a person, or it can also describe the nature of an action as either a good or a bad one.

The meanings of righteous and righteousness are the subjects of long tractates written by Rabbis, the sages of even more ancient times, and Bible scholars of numerous eras. Generally, being righteous is the critical state a human must attain in order to have a proper relationship with God, so, it behooves us to truly understand what that means. I’m sorry to say that it isn’t as simple and

straightforward as I wish it were such that I could just trot out a nice, brief definition of it. Some of the problem is that the word was used differently in different eras and for differing purposes in the Bible times. Let's explore it to better understand it because it has everything to do with how we understand the final words of Habakkuk 2:4 that I said a little while ago are so pivotal.

The original implications of the root word **tzaddiq** seem to be "hard," "even," and "straight", which were the terms used of roads and pathways. But, when that visualization was used in a spiritual context, it was meant to convey that a thing, a man, or even God, ought to be "normal", meaning in its proper state. For example: weights and measures, if accurate and fair, are called "**tzedek**". Roads are "**tzedek**," when they are maintained, safe, and easy to travel. Gifts and offerings to God, when brought in the proper manner and at the right time, are called **zedek**. When a king or judge rules and behaves as he should, he is **zedek**. To justify oneself, or another, to be innocent of a charge, or judged as in the right, that person is **zedek**.

In the instances of legal decisions in the Law of Moses, a slightly different grammatical form of **zedek** is used, which is "**tzaddik**". In this case it is used as a judicial, technical term for the party in a lawsuit that is in the right.

But, when we get to the Prophets, a little different (maybe an additional or expanded) meaning is found. Amos, for instance, uses the terms "righteousness" and "justice" are closely connected as a higher and more pleasing thing in the sight of Yehoveh than mere ritual religiosity. "Social righteousness" alone is a good thing for Israel, but that's not all there is. That kind of righteousness is expected of them, but it doesn't "save" them.

The Prophet Hosea takes yet a different approach about the idea of what righteousness means. He sees righteousness as being worked out by one's "**chesed**" (love, compassion, and mercy). Social justice as a matter merely of outward conduct, and manifest only in public adjustments of institutions and conditions, is not the same as **tsaddek mishpat**... **righteous** justice. Inner repentance, spiritual consideration of one's neighbor and brother, yielding love, and not mechanical justice from rules-keeping alone, then, are the formative elements of righteousness for Hosea. And, since this is so, then

righteous is almost a perfect analogy for moral. Therefore, if the moral law (the Law of Moses) is properly administered then righteous justice is being done.

Notice that in all these cases that righteous and righteousness, to whomever or whatever it is applied, comes from the nature of God and not from the nature of humans. Righteous and righteousness operate like *shalom*; only God can anoint a person with *shalom*. It's source is Heaven and not earth. Therefore, only God is truly righteous. And whatever righteousness mankind might receive pales in comparison to God's inherent righteousness. Further since the very notion of righteousness as something obtained by a human through our merit is an oxymoron, then it is, at best, but a happy fiction... or, perhaps, very limited in what it can apply to. Righteousness is something imputed by God and God alone upon whomever He will, and for whatever His purposes and rationale might be.

So, what about in our passage in Habakkuk? Righteous has taken on a little different meaning. The term "**the** righteous" stands for Israel as represented by the "pious," the "meek," and the "poor" among the Jews. For the moment Babylon, the "unrighteous," may be victorious; but ultimately the righteousness of God's government will be manifest in the victory of "the righteous" (meaning the remnant of God's people). This "righteousness," which is the victorious purpose of God's providence, is not conditioned or expressed by any ritual. Rather, it is that justice and love are the contents of righteousness. The remnant of Israel, having suffered, will be purified and purged of its sins. Its triumph, therefore, will bring on the establishment of God's righteousness... not their own.

After the time of the Babylonian exile, the more precise meaning of righteous and righteousness evolves a little further and begins to include the individual and not just the community in general. Jumping several centuries to the synagogue era that the New Testament was centered around, the righteous came to be identified not with the ideal citizen of Zion, but with him whose "delight is in the law". The Law (by now meaning some hybrid of the Law of Moses and Tradition that we best know as Jewish Law) and its observance became an integral part of Jewish righteousness... at least in their own minds.

In other words, they had evolved themselves away from the true meaning of righteousness and correction was needed.

This is as far as I want to go for now, because this suffices for our purposes of understanding Habakkuk when he uses those terms righteous and righteousness. **Tzaddik**. Now, back to our verse and the final few words:

"...but the righteous will attain life through trusting faithfulness."

Habakkuk was not referring to righteous individuals (as though the verse reads "but the righteous persons will attain life through trusting faithfulness").

Rather he was referring to Israel (in this case, Judeans) as "the righteous" ...a name for the group of proper God worshippers. This is not to say that gentile Believers could not rightfully apply this to themselves, eventually. But we must not put thoughts into Habakkuk's mouth that neither he or other Judeans had in that era. His viewpoint was local... not universal...his own people, not everyone... and it was to occur in a fairly near term... not hundreds of years into the future.

The final aspect of this verse centers around the last couple of words. In Hebrew they are **be-emunah**. The CJB says it means trusting faithfulness. The KJV says it simply means faith. The YLT says it means steadfastness. The foundation of this entire premise goes all the way to Genesis, and the Patriarch Abraham.

CJB Genesis 15:6 *He (Abraham) believed in Yehoveh, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

In Hebrew, this says that Abraham **aman** Yehoveh and that Yehoveh credited it to Abraham as **tzedek**. **Aman** is said to mean to support, or to confirm, or to be faithful. So, that word means to devote oneself to Yehoveh in every way a human can. This is such a core principle for true Hebraic meaning of what one's relationship with God had always been about, that Paul picks up on it verbatim. When Paul is explaining how a person becomes righteous, he says this:

CJB Romans 4:3 *For what does the Tanakh say? "Avraham put his trust*

in God, and it was credited to his account as righteousness.

And, Paul will rely on Abraham's confession of faith as being the way to true righteousness in other letters as well. As Believers... Jew or Gentile... this is to be our understanding. If we attempt to substitute any doctrine for this one, then we have missed the mark.

CJB Habakkuk 2:5 *Truly, wine is treacherous; the arrogant will not live at peace but keeps expanding his desires like Sh'ol; like death, he can never be satisfied; he keeps collecting all the nations for himself, rallying to himself all the peoples.*

In the Bible, wine represents 2 different things: one is joy, the other is drunkenness. So, in verse 5 the negative aspect of wine is used to describe those who are not upright. While the Babylonians are not specifically mentioned, in the context of the first fulfillment of this prophecy, it is certainly they to whom this is immediately applied.

We are to understand this NOT as wine drinking of itself being evil in any way. Rather it is the overindulgence to near stupor that is condemned, because of what it causes. Biblically, the effects of drunkenness are the lack of needed inhibitions, it brings on bad judgment, it causes people to stumble around in confusion and chaos, and to commit sinful acts that they normally might not. So, while indeed the literal effects of wine are meant here, as much or more this refers to all these bad consequences from drunkenness.

Drunkenness blinds people from truth. They are more easily deceived. In Daniel chapter 5 we read this story that directly connects to Habakkuk's prophetic oracle.

CJB Daniel 5:1-6 *Belshatzar the king gave a great banquet for a thousand of his lords, and in the presence of the thousand he was drinking wine. ² While tasting the wine, Belshatzar ordered that the gold and silver vessels which his father N'vukhadnetzar had removed from the temple in Yerushalayim be brought; so that the king, his*

lords, his wives and his concubines could drink from them. ³ So they brought the gold vessels which had been removed from the sanctuary of the house of God in Yerushalayim; and the king, his lords, his wives and his concubines drank from them. ⁴ They drank their wine and praised their gods made of gold, silver, bronze, iron, wood and stone. ⁵ Suddenly, the fingers of a human hand appeared and began writing on the plaster of the palace wall by the lampstand. When the king saw the palm of the hand that was writing, ⁶ the king's face took on a different look. As frightening thoughts rose up within him, his hip joints gave way and his knees started knocking together.

The chapter concludes with these words:

CJB Daniel 5:30 *³⁰ That very night Belshatzar, the king of the Kasdim, was killed.*

On that night the Babylonian Empire fell to Persia, it was widely known that Belshatzar and the mighty men of His kingdom were feasting, partying and drinking at a lavish banquet. So, drunkenness was right at the center... at the very least symbolic... of the reason for the end of Babylon.

The next part of verse 5 speaks of “the arrogant”. Treacherous wine drinking is part of the characteristics of the arrogant. Remember: what is happening here is that the term “the righteous” (meaning the group that is the faithful remnant of God’s people) is being set against the arrogant (meaning the group that is against God, and therefore also against the righteous).

As verse 5 continues, we are told that the arrogant keeps expanding their desires. “Desires” is how the CJB translates the word **nephesh** in this verse. Other Bible versions choose “greed” or “appetite”. And, when we look at the Lexicons for the meaning of **nephesh**, this is among the 10 or so different meanings in English that are assigned to this one word. We talked about this earlier and I told you that I don’t buy it. The reason for all these translations that are so very different from each other is because the word isn’t nearly as understood to scholars as it is made out to be. And, because of the determination to keep various Christian doctrines intact, very questionable

meanings are given to it. So, what might be a better choice here? Considering that this is talking about those who are not upright, then I think it is that these persons or this group are enlarging the negative part of their human essence (their **nephesh**) that carries them even further away from a relationship with Yehoveh. This course of action reflects itself in greed, avarice, self-indulgence, a lack of concern for one's fellow man... everything that is the opposite of righteous.

This destructive mindset and inner self are compared to **Sheol**, the grave. A place where the dead go. **Sheol** has an insatiable appetite to call to the living to commit sins against God and consequently for them to die so that they can come and live with the prince of **Sheol**... Satan. So, **Sheol** is personified as a being (just a literary technique; the Hebrews did not generally think of **Sheol** as a living entity).

While later in Israel's history a more developed form of belief about what happened after death came about, generally speaking in Habakkuk's era the thought was that everybody dies and goes into the grave. Ancestor worship was still a big part of how the Hebrews thought of the mysterious afterlife. I see no evidence that the later belief of there being two underground chambers as we find in Luke 16... one for the righteous dead that is called Abraham's Bosom... the other for the wicked dead that is called the Place of Torments or **Sheol** (Hades is NOT in our New Testaments despite what your Bibles might say)... existed in what we could loosely call the Old Testament times. Yet, the belief was that the dead were separated into 2 groups in some way by God and so 2 entirely different experiences were to be expected. This reflected the "2-ways" concept of choosing the way of life or the way of death that the Bible revolves around since the earliest writings. Thus, we are reading in verses 4 and 5 how the inner and outer characteristics of those people who follow the way of life versus those who follow the way of death can be identified.

We'll stop here and continue at verse 5 next time.