

## Habakkuk: Introduction

### I. Writer and Date

#### Writer

Virtually nothing is known of Habakkuk's occupation prior to his *employment* in the writing of this book. Likewise, although it is speculated that Jerusalem was his home, this is derived from contextual clues rather than as a known fact. As we've seen with other prophets previously covered, these details are relatively unimportant. The crucial bit of vital information is again found in the opening statement of the work, "***The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet saw.***" Here we discern all that we need to determine the relevance of the book: (1) Habakkuk is called "*the prophet*"; and, (2) he "*saw*" an "*oracle*," or message from Jehovah, that he shared with all humanity from that day to this.

The only other detail concerning Habakkuk that can be *gleaned*, or at least upon which we can conjecture, has to do with his name. "Habakkuk" is variously interpreted as "embrace," or "ardent embrace" (Hailey); "pressed to the heart" (Farrar); or according to one who quotes Martin Luther, "who took his nation to his heart, comforted it and held it up, as one embraces and presses to his bosom a poor weeping child, calming and consoling it with good hope- if God so will." (Cunningham Geike, Hours with the Bible, Vol.V., pp.353-354; {quoted from Hailey}). All of which points to one central consideration: Habakkuk, unlike any prophet before, comes from a different perspective. Other prophets have mostly spoken **for God to the people**. But Habakkuk mostly speaks **for the people to God!** Thus, he *embraces to his bosom* the plight of his people, and presents to Jehovah a plea for an understanding of it.

Habakkuk does not understand God's tolerance of the rampant lawlessness and injustice in Jerusalem (either the *city* itself or as representing the nation of *Judah* as a whole), especially against the rapid rise in power and spread of the Babylonian kingdom. He has difficulty understanding the wickedness of God's (and his own) people, but is further perplexed by the apparent succession of a nation even more wicked: Babylon. Because of this greatly confused state, Habakkuk's faith in Jehovah is challenged. **This book is a plea to God for understanding of His ways.** It is not a *venting* of Habakkuk's anger toward his God, but a true and tender expression of his desire to comprehend the Lord's ways. He has both his people and his faith *pressed to his bosom* as he beseeches the Almighty for answers... not only for himself, but also for his nation.

#### The Date

Concerning the date of the work, there is considerably more with which to work than was had concerning the writer. As we've seen with other Minor Prophets, internal evidence coupled with the history of the period allows an affixing of an approximate but fairly specific date between **612 B.C.** and **606 B.C.** This range is achieved by the following:

1. Habakkuk sees and is concerned with the westward exploits of the Babylonians. This began **after** their defeat of the Assyrians in **612 B.C.** (the fall of Nineveh).

2. But he is also resigned, in 3:16, to “*wait quietly for the day of distress, for the people to arise who will invade us.*” This unmistakably places the work **before** the first deportation of Judean residents to Babylon in **605 B.C.**

The book must then be dated between **612** and **606 B.C.**

## II. Background

Beginning in earnest with Zephaniah, the political world of this Middle Eastern region was experiencing an upheaval. Assyria, the great empire that had ruled the world for some time, was now beginning to crumble. Nahum unmistakably predicted its ultimate demise. The Babylonians and their general (and later, *king*) Nebuchadnezzar had defeated the capital city of Nineveh in 612 B.C. Just three years later, they had finished off the remainder of the Assyrian army at Haran in 609 B.C. Pharaoh Necco and his Egyptian army had attempted to join Assyrian expatriates against Babylon, but had been prevented by Josiah, the king of Judah. Though he won the victory over Egypt, Josiah was mortally wounded in the battle. This brought to an end the sweeping reforms in Judah that the young Josiah had enacted. The remaining kings of Judah were spiritually weak, and led the nation right back into the depraved depths of idolatry.

Only four years after the defeat of Assyria at Haran (609 B.C.), Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army met and defeated Pharaoh Necco and the Egyptians at Carchemish (605 B.C.). This cleared the way for the expansion of the new Babylonian Empire to the west and southward through Canaan to Egypt itself. This task Nebuchadnezzar began immediately by pursuing the fleeing Egyptian army back to Egypt. While so doing, he received word that his father, Nabopolassar, had died. He turned around in Judah and began the return trip to Babylon to assume the throne. But before leaving, he took the *best of the best* of Judah’s young men back as captives to serve in his court. This group included Daniel and his three famous friends.

Although Habakkuk writes prior to the taking of Jerusalem (605 B.C.), he knows of the fall of Nineveh, Assyria’s capital, at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. And, he correctly fears that Babylon will soon likewise “*swallow up*” his own nation, 1:13. While the prophet acknowledges the wickedness of Judah (cf. 1:2-4), he cannot seem to comprehend why God would use the eminently *more wicked* Babylonians to punish them, 1:13. **Such is the impetus for the book** (at least from Habakkuk’s perspective). It is Habakkuk’s appeal to the Lord for understanding of the *divine justice*—or the perceived lack thereof, which he sees playing out in his own land. Habakkuk *embraces* the plight of the faithful few in Judah, and beseeches the Lord for their cause. Like the prophet Jonah some 180 years before him, although Habakkuk does not accuse God of wrong doing directly, he does question God’s application of justice.

## III. Contents

Although several indicators of the contents of the book have been given above, the basic format of the work has not been discussed. Habakkuk is unusual among the prophetic works, as previously mentioned, in that he seems to speak **for the people to God** rather than the other way around. But the book is also distinctive because it is in the form of *a series of speeches*. Habakkuk lays before the Lord his confusion as to why Judah has been allowed to become so wicked. Then Jehovah answers this

concern by pointing to the rise of Babylon as His avenging sword for the punishment of Judah. But this only poses additional problems for Habakkuk. Namely, “*Why dost Thou look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallowed up those more righteous than they?*” (1:13). The answer of Jehovah comes that “*the righteous will live by faith, 2:4*. Thus, Habakkuk concludes that he must *wait patiently* for the coming of Jehovah, 3:16b. He further comes to understand that although suffering will be enjoined even upon the righteous while the wicked are punished and destroyed among Judah, wicked Babylon also will be ultimately be destroyed for their *proud* and *evil* hearts, cf. 1:11b; 2:4a.

The prophet’s faith has been challenged by world events and what he fails to understand regarding the *ways of the Lord*. After having been instructed by Jehovah, Habakkuk’s faith then swells to beautiful crescendo in prayerful expression, chp.3. Remembering and recounting the Lord’s deliverance of His people throughout their history, he finally realizes that divine justice is ultimately that which saves. Thus comforted and resolved, Habakkuk *embraces* the Lord’s way and manifests it to all who will listen.

#### **IV. Overall Lessons to be Learned from Habakkuk**

Though it has not been done this way in previous studies on the prophets, in this case it seemed appropriate to draw some specific lessons to attention before proceeding further. Please note and look for these points as progression through the book is made:

- **God judges (punishes) the wicked - all of them.** Though some may seem to prosper *in* or *through* their wickedness, ultimately they will meet the righteous and just wrath of God, 1:11.
- **Faithfulness to Jehovah is the only surety of permanence.** Israel and Judah alike (as well as the other nations of the region) had sought to preserve themselves through alliances with one another. Habakkuk resolves the question: the only true *ally* that can preserve is Jehovah. One must be allied with Him through faith to remain, 1:12.
- **Evil is, by its own nature, destructive.** This lesson is plainly taught in the New Testament in Gal.6:7-8. It is likewise taught in Hab.1:11b; 2:4-5.
- **Discipline from the Lord is not pleasant.** The Hebrew writer (chp.12) speaks of the loving discipline of the Father toward his *individual children*. Habakkuk seems to take up the matter on a *national level*. The nation of Judah will be severely disciplined by the Lord, and only the *faithful* will survive it.

In Habakkuk, both the man and the resultant book, we see *confusion*, *perplexity*, and *doubt* grow and mature into *resolute faith* and *patience* in a most beautiful way.

#### **V. Basic Outline of the Book**

##### **I. Habakkuk’s Perplexity and the Lord’s Reply, 1:2 – 2:3**

- A. Habakkuk: How can the Lord be indifferent to the wickedness of Judah? 1:2-4
- B. Jehovah: The Babylonians are coming to punish Judah. 1:5-11

C. Habakkuk: Will Jehovah use a nation *more wicked than we* to punish us?  
1:12 – 2:1

D. Jehovah: The judgment is sure, but it is not yet time. 2:2-3

## II. Further Explanation from Jehovah: Babylon will be Punished, 2:4-20

A. The righteous will live by faith, 2:4

B. But the wicked will be destroyed, 2:5

C. The 5 “Woes” against Babylon, 2:6-19

1. for *theft* and *plunder*, 2:6-8

2. for desire for a *lasting empire* through *cruelty* and *evil gain*, 2:9-11

3. for building with *bloodshed*, 2:12-14

4. for *disgracing neighbors*, 2:15-17

5. for *idolatry*, 2:18-19

## III. Habakkuk’s Prayer of Faith requesting the Lord’s Compassion, 3:1-19

A. His Petition: *Revive Thy works and in wrath remember mercy*, 3:1-2

B. Recounting the Lord’s previous works for the salvation of His people, 3:3-15

C. Habakkuk trembles at the coming punishment, but expresses faithful confidence in the Lord’s deliverance, 3:16-19

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### Habakkuk Introduction Study/Discussion Questions

1. Since the book itself provides no personal details about the *writer*, what important information can be gleaned about him from 1:1?
2. What does the name “Habakkuk” mean, and in what way is this meaning *appropriate* (whether intentional or coincidental) for the book?
3. What makes Habakkuk somewhat unique among other prophetic works?
4. What does Habakkuk *not understand* (of which he seeks answers/guidance from the Lord)?
5. About when was the book written? How is this date achieved?

6. Other than *speaking to God for the people* (rather than the other way around as typical), what else makes Habakkuk different from other prophetic books?
  
7. Briefly summarize (in your own words or by quotations from the text) each of the following *speeches* in the book:
  - a. by *Habakkuk* in 1:1-4;
  
  - b. by *God* in 1:5-11;
  
  - c. by *Habakkuk* in 1:12 – 2:1;
  
  - d. by *God* in 2:2-5;
  
  - e. by *God* in 2:6-8;
  
  - f. by *God* in 2:9-20
  
  - g. by *Habakkuk* in 3:1-2;
  
  - h. by *Habakkuk* in 3:3-15;
  
  - i. by *Habakkuk* in 3:16-19.
  
8. How would you describe Habakkuk's *mental state/attitude* at the outset of the book as distinct from the end of the book?
  
9. What do YOU think are the overall *lessons for us* to be learned from Habakkuk?

**Lesson 1, Habakkuk 1:1 – 2:3**  
***Habakkuk's Perplexity & the Lord's Reply***

**I. Habakkuk's First Question: How can the *righteous Jehovah* be indifferent to the *wickedness of Judah*? 1:2-4**

The “*oracle*” to which 1:1 (NASB) refers is the same as Nahum 1:1's “*burden*.” It literally refers to a *heavy load* that the prophets raise up in proclamation. In Nahum, it was a proclamation of the utter destruction of Nineveh. However, here in Habakkuk, the *burden* is very different in that it refers to a proclamation of *perplexity* in the mind of the prophet as He seeks answers from Jehovah. Habakkuk is unique among the prophets in this regard. As was pointed out in the introduction, the prophets generally speak *for God* and *to the people*. Whereas, Habakkuk speaks *for himself* (and by extrapolation *for the people*) *to God*, and then records/relays God's answers *to* and *for the people*. **Thus, the book contains the deep, thoughtful ruminations from the mind of a man burdened with that which he cannot comprehend, and the expressions of those questions to the God in whom he trusts.** Because of this nature of the book, it becomes so very interesting to those of every generation who find themselves struggling to comprehend their own perceived injustices of life from a God they know to be immutably just.

And so, Habakkuk gives voice to his questions for Jehovah beginning in v.2, “***How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou will not hear?***” This opening question of the book is the basis for all that follows. From it, several things should be noted before moving on:

1. The prophet's confusion is not that God is *unjustly* punishing those who deserve it from among Judah. In fact, it is the opposite. Habakkuk wants to know why God hasn't *already* punished the wicked from among his own people.
2. So, Habakkuk is not *initially* (cf.3:2) pleading for God's mercy and compassion in judgment- he is pleading for God's retribution and punishment of the *wicked* (and subsequently for the *relief* of the *righteous*).
3. It also appears obvious from his question that punishment of the wicked among his countrymen is something Habakkuk considers as “long overdue.” Evidently the prophet has been beseeching the Lord regarding this matter for some time, and even wonders aloud why he isn't being heard by Him.
4. Finally, the prophet seems to be making the common assumption that because God has not acted upon his petition, that it has not been heard. In fact, whether because of the petition or not, God had been well aware of the situation to which Habakkuk refers, and likewise had been *arranging* a solution to it.

Often, we suppose that because we cannot “see” God acting, He is not. Such is foolishly shortsighted! It is always folly to assume that we can make God aware of anything, cf. Matt.6:8,32b. Jehovah was fully aware of the situation in Judea and had been *raising up* the Chaldeans to render the judgment for which Habakkuk is calling. Herein is a great and challenging lesson for mankind in general, and God's people specifically: **It is easy for the faithful to “see” God's actions of the past, but it is keenly difficult for any man to “see” God's actions *in his own time!*** In this regard,

the *plain view* of history must be used as faithful, but often sightless, assurance for the present. Isn't that a big part not only of the definition of faith, but the purpose of it?

Also from **v.2**, notice that Habakkuk cries unto the Lord concerning the "*Violence!*" that he sees. This is not the violence that *outside* sources are inflicting upon Judah, but the violence of Judah upon itself. That is, the violence of those wrongs committed by the rich and powerful of Judah and Jerusalem upon those who are faithful, but unable to withstand them, cf. Jas.2:6ff. The real issue here is that Habakkuk does not understand why God doesn't interfere in a way to intercept and stop this violence. Again, a common fallacy should be noted. **Man often wants God to "solve his problems" directly by intervention.** But this not usually how God works in the lives of men. What Habakkuk failed to "see" was that **God most often works in the lives of men (and nations) indirectly.** How so? In this present case, has God truly refused to act? No. In fact, He has used the *indirect* suasion of His laws of morality and righteousness; He has used several prophets to call attention to sin and solutions; and even used His providential discipline in repeated efforts to correct Judah. But Habakkuk fails to note these efforts and instead wonders only why God has not acted more *directly*.

In **vv.3-4** the prophet continues his questioning of God by giving voice to some specific examples of the *violence, iniquity, and wickedness* he has already mentioned. Habakkuk cannot comprehend why God, who sees all, does not intervene to stop the injustice that is so plainly evident. He says *destruction and violence* are "*ever before me*"; adding further that *strife and contention* "*arise.*" Habakkuk's point seems to be that surely God, who is omniscient, can see what the prophet himself sees *arise* and is "*ever before*" him. The *ignoring of laws, lack of justice, the surrounding of the righteous by the wicked, and the perversion of justice* are easily discernable. Since Habakkuk clearly sees these inequities, why can't God? And if He does see them, how can His justice and righteousness allow them to continue? These questions evidently torment Habakkuk.

## II. Jehovah Answers: the Chaldeans are coming to punish Judah, **1:5-11.**

The initial response of Jehovah to Habakkuk's questions comes in the form of a challenge. While Habakkuk had been able to clearly see injustice that seemed to demand action from God, he had *not been able to see* that Jehovah's response had already begun. Therefore, God calls upon the prophet to *look* outside (of his own short-sighted experience) and "*Observe!*" among the nations, **v.5**. What he sees would cause *wonder and astonishment*, for Jehovah has been "*raising up the Chaldeans*", **v.6**. There are two other critical pieces of information that need to be gleaned from **v.5**: (1) the punishment of Judah by the Chaldeans would be "*in your days*"; and (2) Habakkuk's lack of knowledge about these events has been due to his not being told about them. And why was he not told? "**You would not believe if you were told.**" Some things are so foreign to our understanding that words are inadequate to communicate them, cp. John 16:12. Unfortunately, sometimes we must see to believe, cf. John 20:24-29. While Habakkuk **could see** the injustices of Judah upon herself, he **could not see** God's solution to the problem. Such a solution as the Chaldeans was imperceptible to him. Thus, he would have to **wait and see**. To this point, Habakkuk eventually and faithfully acquiesces, cf. 2:1 and 3:16ff.

In **vv.6b-11a**, Jehovah gives Habakkuk a vivid and frightening description of the Chaldean forces that are coming to punish Judah. Other prophets had similarly described the Assyrians as an exceedingly *fierce* and *brutal* force. To defeat such warriors, one must be more *brutal*, *violent*, and *fierce* (or be allied with God!). Such were the Babylonians. They had defeated the Assyrian forces first at Nineveh (612 B.C.), and then finally at Haran (609 B.C.). Thus, God utilizes graphic language and several comparisons to manifest the nature of the forces of retribution that are quickly coming upon Judah from Babylon. Please note the following descriptions and analogies:

1. *fierce and impetuous; march throughout the earth to seize places not their own, v.6*; this describes their *nature, scope, and ability*;
2. *dreaded and feared, v.7a*; this is the effect they have on others;
3. *their justice and authority originate with themselves, v.7b*; they are *self-willed* people who acknowledge no authority other than their own power and might;
4. *horses swifter than leopards, v.8a*; this shows the rapidity with which they can and do strike;
5. *keener than wolves, v.8b*; the wolf has the ability to find, capture, and devour its prey overnight;
6. *fly like the eagle swooping down to devour, v.8c*; the Chaldean army had the ability to attack from afar with lightening speed to consume their prey;
7. *all come for violence, v.9a*; diplomacy, political alliances, or treaties were not their purposes; they came only to conquer;
8. *their horde of faces moves forward, v.9b*; they look back neither in regret or shame at the destruction left in their wake;
9. *collect captives like sand, v.9c*; this innumerable *horde* is able to likewise capture innumerable peoples;
10. *mock at kings and laugh at rulers, v.10a*; since their only authority is their own power, they revere no king or political sovereign;
11. *laugh at every fortress and heap rubble to capture, v.10b*; the defense of the nations and cities before them pose no obstacle; and,
12. *will sweep through like the wind and pass on, v.11*; like a tornado of destruction which appears suddenly and then vanishes, so will the Chaldean forces make shambles of Judah.

Perhaps anticipating Habakkuk's objection to the Chaldeans being utilized to punish Judah, Jehovah finishes His first speech by stating that they too, "*will be held guilty,*" v.11b. God using them to punish did not exonerate or excuse their violent, murderous, ferocity. They would be held accountable by Him because their "*strength is their god*" rather than acknowledging Jehovah's authoritative supremacy and omnipotence in worship of Him.



### III. Habakkuk's Second Question: Will Jehovah use a nation *more wicked* to punish Judah? 1:12 – 2:1

Although the answer of Jehovah to Habakkuk's first question prompted additional perplexity and questions for the prophet, he begins by acknowledging two essential **attributes of God** as a precursor to his other big question:

1. "**from everlasting,**" v.12a; this is a statement of the **eternal nature** of Jehovah;
2. "**my Holy One,**" v.12b; the prophet also acknowledges the **absolute holiness** and **righteousness** of God.

These admissions from the prophet are themselves in the form of a rhetorical question; the conclusionary point of which is found in the next sentence, "**We will not die.**" This faithful assertion is made as the prophet now understands that God will indeed punish Judah's wickedness. Their sins have not gone unnoticed as the prophet had previously feared. Now in comprehension of these things, Habakkuk also **embraces his trust in the very essence of God's eternal righteousness to spare those still faithful to Him in the midst of Judah's decadent iniquity.** All of which is great, but Habakkuk now is prompted by further confusion to ask another question.

He accepts that Chaldea/Babylon will punish Judah, and certainly acknowledges the justice of Judah being punished, v.12c. But the problem is that Habakkuk cannot understand why God would utilize a nation *more wicked* (than Judah) to do so. He is careful to again make essential acknowledgements. This time, the prophet cites the **purity of Jehovah** and His refusal to *bless, or favor, the wicked* as being incongruent with what has now been revealed regarding the future. How could a *righteous and holy* God such as Jehovah raise up a *fiercely wicked* people (Chaldea) to punish those *less wicked* (Judah) than themselves? This seems to be inconsistent with the prophet's view of the Almighty, v.13. Furthermore, how could God *allow, let alone cause, such?* The prophet does not seem to object to the punishment prescribed for Judah by God, as much as it troubles Him that the **method of punishment** seems to be inconsistent with his understanding of the nature of God. Thus, God's answer to Habakkuk's initial question has spawned an even more troubling (or so it appears) concern in the prophet's very perception of right, wrong, and **God**.

In vv.14-17, the prophet seeks to illustrate his concern by highlighting the plight of Judah and other nations before the Chaldeans. The analogy utilized is that of Babylon being a *fisherman* who is able to capture, either by *net* or *hook*, all the *fish* of the waters- Judah and all other nations who have or will become their *prey*. The analogy seems to be intended to demonstrate two things: (1) the *greediness* and *waste* of the Chaldeans; and (2) the *helplessness* of Judah and the other nations. Given what the Lord has told Habakkuk, he can now see "no end" to the *slaying of the nations* at the hands of Chaldea, v.17.

Despite these concerns, Habakkuk resides himself to *standing on his post*, and *watching to see how the Lord will answer* this additional question, 2:1. In military terms, the prophet will not, because he does not comprehend the *why* of what Jehovah is going to do, abandon his duty post. He also seems to be aware that he is treading on

dangerous ground by even questioning Jehovah in this way. Note that he expects *reproof*, **v.1b**.

**IV. Jehovah Answers Again: *Write it down*- the vision of things to come is *sure*, but it is the time is *not yet*. 2:3-4**

It is fascinating to note that Jehovah does not really answer Habakkuk's second question regarding the *righteousness* of having the "*more wicked*" Chaldeans punish *wicked Judah*. Instead God says, in effect, "Write it down, it's true and sure to happen just the way I told you." Rather than quibble with Habakkuk over the *rightfulness* of the plan (God has no need to *justify* Himself to His own creation, cf. Rom.9:20-21), Jehovah simply affirms that it will happen and tells the prophet to record it plainly.

Some have suggested that the phrase, "*That the one who reads it may run*" means that the record be so plain that one could even read it while *running by*. While I suppose this may be so, it seems more probably that the phrase is suggestive of the close proximity of the event to the present. While the time for these things to come to pass "*is yet for the appointed time*" in the future, "*it hastens toward the goal*" in that it is not far off. Therefore, the *running* would be either (1) in quickly preparing; and/or (2) warning others quickly before the event takes place (that they may *flee*?).

The Lord concludes this section by assuring the prophet that these things will indeed occur, v.3. Habakkuk, and those to/for whom he writes, may not be able to comprehend fully the *how* or *why* that these things will happen as they will, but such lack of understanding will in no way deter their occurrence. Again, there is a universal lesson for all in Jehovah's answer to Habakkuk. **While we may not understand all the ways of God, we should never allow our lack of comprehension to change our *faithful obedience* into *paralyzing doubt* of His word!**

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**Lesson 1, Habakkuk 1:1 – 2:3 Study/Discussion Questions**

1. In what ways is Habakkuk a "*burden*" (the literal of "*oracle*" in v.1)?
2. For *review* and *clarity* purposes, how is the book/contents of Habakkuk unique among prophetic works of the Bible?
3. What is Habakkuk's first *big* question? And, on what assumptions/presumptions is it founded?

4. What is God's answer to this question? And, why had God not already told Habakkuk about these things?
  
5. How does God conclude His answer to Habakkuk's first *big* question, and why?
  
6. Before Habakkuk asks his second *big* question (in v.13), he acknowledges three important points. What are they?
  
7. What is Habakkuk's second *big* question, specifically? What is the basis for this question?
  
8. Though Habakkuk accepts God's answer (of vv.5-11), what additional concern does he express in v.17?
  
9. Despite his questions and overall lack of comprehension, what does Habakkuk say he will do in 2:1, and why? How is this significant to/for us?
  
10. What is the Lord's reply to Habakkuk's second *big* question (of 1:13) in 2:2-3? How is this reply significant to/for us?

## Lesson 2, Habakkuk 2:4–20

### ***Further Explanation from Jehovah: Babylon will be Punished***

#### **I. The Righteous will Live by Faith, but the Wicked will be Destroyed, 2:4-5**

The last section ended with Jehovah's answer to the second question posed by Habakkuk. The first had been "*How long, O Lord, will I call for help, and Thou wilt not hear?*" In this query it is apparent that Habakkuk had long sought for the Lord's punishing judgment upon Judah for her own wickedness. He cannot comprehend how the righteousness of God could allow the wickedness of Judah to continue unchecked. When Jehovah answered this objection by pointing out that Babylon was arising to punish Judah, this prompted a further inquiry from Habakkuk, "*Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor. Why dost Thou look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why are Thou silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?*" In effect, the prophet cannot understand how the *purity* of God could allow, let alone cause, the "more wicked" Babylonians to punish Judah. This did not seem to correlate to his understanding of the absolute purity and righteousness of God.

Jehovah's initial answer to Habakkuk's perplexity was, paraphrased, "It's sure, write it down. It's not here yet, but it will come," cf. 2:2-3. But this was not to be the only answer given to God's prophet.

Beginning in v.4, the Lord gives indications that Babylon- those to be used to punish Judah, will likewise receive retribution for their atrocities. But note specifically what is said of this nation He would use as His arm of justice, "*His (the Babylonian nation's) soul is not right within him...*". This *unrighteousness* is partially explained by the preceding statement in the verse, "*the proud one*". Though Babylon was being raised up by Jehovah to do His bidding, their *proud souls* neither acknowledged the fact, nor gave glory to Him regarding His prospering of them.

God's explanation to Habakkuk regarding the nature and condition, and therefore His reasoning for the coming destruction of Babylon is continued in v.5. Note some the terms and phrases utilized: *haughty, does not stay at home (in Babylon), enlarges his appetite like Sheol (death/the grave) and is never satisfied (with additional conquests), and thus gathers all nations and peoples to himself*. These attributes and atrocities have not gone unnoticed by God, and neither will they be left unpunished, though for the time being, He will utilize this foreign behemoth to chastise Judah, His own people. This explanation by God to Habakkuk's question(s) of 1:13-17 also serve to introduce the "woes" pronounced upon Babylon in the next section of the book.

#### **II. The Five "Woes" against Babylon, 2:6-20**

##### **A. The First Woe against Babylon for *Theft and Plunder*, 2:6-8**

The "*all of these*" of v.6a refers to the "*all nations*" and "*all peoples*" of the preceding verse whom Babylon has conquered or otherwise *collected*. These people will take advantage of the opportunity given them by Babylon's demise to take a song of reproach and *taunt* against them. Concerning the lyrics of this *parable/proverb-song* we are not left to surmise on our own. The contents would

be “*Woe to him who increases what is not his-*”. This refers to the appetite of the Babylonians in building up themselves with the wealth of other nations. Such is surely morally wrong, even aside from any direct knowledge of the scriptures. But this is exactly what Babylon had done. These *victim nations* would have, and would take, the opportunity to *mock* them when the Babylonians inevitably fell.

The second part, concerning “*For how long-...?*”, is not answered specifically for those *victim nations*, although Habakkuk himself had been told that it would occur within his own days, cf. 1:5. Generally speaking, questions of time “must remain locked in the purpose and providence of God.” (A Commentary on the Minor Prophets; H.Hailey; p.284)

In vv.6b-7, the relationship of *borrower* and *lender* is utilized to explain what will happen to Babylon in vv.6b-7. Though by force, Babylon had made itself rich by *borrowing* (plundering) the wealth of other nations. Such *loans by extortion* will soon come due as Babylon’s victim “*creditors*” will “*rise up suddenly,*” with the end result being Babylon becoming “*plunder for them.*”

It is further made clear in v.8 that even those nations who are *no more* would not be forgotten. This is so because “*all the remainder of peoples*” would return with interest the “*human bloodshed and violence*” done by Babylon upon them. In October of 539 B.C, some 23 years after the death of Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus and his Medo-Persian forces fulfilled this prediction by conquering Babylon.

### **B. The Second Woe against Babylon for *Trying to Build a Lasting Empire with Evil Gain, 2:9-11***

Obviously, this woe is much akin to the previous one. But there is a difference. In the preceding woe, Babylon is accused of the moral wrong of taking that to which he is not entitled. Though that concept is also found in this particular woe, the further condemnation is that Babylon has, with such ill-gotten gain, attempted to build an impregnable and lasting empire. Note specifically the last part of v.9, “*to put his nest on high to be delivered from the hand of calamity.*” It was not just what Babylon had done to *gain wealth*, but also what was done (or attempted) *with the wealth* that brought forth condemnation from Jehovah. Both are wrong! Doing “right” or “good things” with spoils does not make the act of taking it wrongly acceptable to God. So in v.10, the second woe is pronounced as “*shameful*” and “*sinning against yourself.*” The end result is that the *house* built to be a *fortress against calamity* would itself cry out against its maker. Note v.11 where the *stones* and *rafters* of Babylon’s house will “*answer it from the framework.*” This perhaps foreshadows a similar principle set forth by the Apostle Paul in 1Cor.3:10-15 where the integrity of the structure built is, at least in part, determined by the quality of the materials used to construct it.

### **C. The Third Woe against Babylon for *Building with Bloodshed and Violence, 2:12-14***

On the surface, this woe sounds much like a restating in other words of the previous two. It is not. The *first woe* decried the **source** of the materials Babylon used to build itself up- *theft and plunder* of other nations. The *second*

woe was pronounced against the **purpose** of Babylon in attaining this ill-gotten wealth- to *build a lasting and impregnable* empire. And now the *third woe* is one which claims that the effort to build such an empire was done with “*bloodshed*” and “*violence*”- that Babylon built by the **method** of conquered slave-labor and the violent abuse of those slaves, **v.12**.

Although Jehovah had indeed “*raised up the Chaldeans*” to punish Judah and other godless nations, **v.13** makes it clear that He did not endorse the methods they had used to do so! That “*people toil for fire*” and “*nations grow weary for nothing*” was neither Jehovah’s way nor intention. This was the responsibility of Babylon, and for such abuse it would be punished. This truth will be manifested throughout the world, from **v.14**, as “*the earth will be filled the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*” Fulfilled prophecy, as these things were predicted for Babylon and came to pass through Cyrus, stands as the clarion call of such knowledge of Jehovah.

#### **D. The Fourth Woe against Babylon for *Disgracing Neighbors*, **2:15-17****

As the previous woes have, respectively, decried Babylon’s *source* for getting wealth, its *purpose* in using it, and its *method* of implementing it, this fourth woe concerns the *additional* and *unnecessary/excessive* **disgracing of their neighbors**. Not only had Babylon stolen by force from and abused them as slaves, they further sought to *shame* and *disgrace* their neighbors in the process of it all. The analogy used to manifest this particular sin is that of *making their neighbors drink mixed drinks to get them drunk*- they did so in order to “*look on their nakedness!*” **v.15**. This highlights an important point of consideration: Jehovah not only condemns the sin, but also the *purposes* for which it was committed. For both the sin itself and the evil intent Babylon would be held accountable- as will we when sin in similar ways and for similar purposes!

In **v.16**, we see the old adage, “What goes around, comes around” being manifested. Babylon is, in essence, told that what they have caused others to do will be done to them, cf. Gal.6:7-8. Babylon will be made to “*drink*” and “*expose your own nakedness*” for “*the cup in the Lord’s right hand will come around to you, and utter disgrace will come upon your glory.*”

A specific example of Babylon’s sin is given in **v.17**. Whether Babylon had *literally* or *figuratively* devastated Lebanon’s “*beasts*” is unclear. Since the verse further states that the result was Lebanon being “*terrified*” by the act, it appears to be literal. But this wasn’t all that Babylon had done- “*human bloodshed and violence done to the land*” were also part of their sins. Apparently, Babylon had destroyed both man and beast in Lebanon as well as the crops of the land. For this, Babylon itself would be “*overwhelmed*” by the Lord, cf.v.17a.

#### **E. The Fifth Woe against Babylon for *Idolatry*, **2:18-19****

The fifth and final woe concerns the **worship** of Babylon. This woe is tied to the others from the standpoint of being the end result of Babylon’s sin. As they had sought to build a lasting empire with ill-gotten gains, slave labor, and even reveled in the disgrace of their neighbors, Babylon also worshipped *the work of*

*their own hands* through idolatry. The futility of such is manifested in **v.18a**, “*What profit is the idol when its maker carved it, or an image, a teacher of falsehood?*” Babylon had, in essence if not in totality, become idolatrous worshippers of their own desires and power, cf. Phil.3:19. He had, as **v.18b** puts it, *trusted in his own handiwork*.

Therefore, the fifth and final woe is pronounced in **v.19** for **idolatry** and the trust placed in it. *Wood and stone* idols have surely taught Babylon nothing, for “*there is no breath at all inside it.*”

In stark opposition to the *dumb idols* at whose feet the Babylonians have worshipped and learned, **v.20** concludes, “*But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him.*” The point of the enjoined command of *silence* seems to be connected to the previous *silence* of Babylon’s idols. While the *idols* did not speak to nor instruct them, all the world is about to be taught by the *teaching* of Jehovah in the destruction of Babylon for her sins! (cp. Job 40:3-5)

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### **Habakkuk 2:4-20 Study/Discussion Questions**

1. To reset the context for this section (2:4-20), remember that Habakkuk had asked if God would utilize a people (the Babylonians) *more wicked* than Judah to punish/purge her, 1:13. From 2:2-3, what was God’s *initial* answer to this question?
2. How does God describe Babylon to Habakkuk in vv.4a,5? How does this description relate back to Habakkuk’s question of 1:13?
3. What is the significance of 2:4b, “*But the righteous will live by faith*” to Habakkuk’s audience *then*, and *now*?

4. Gal.6:7-8 states a principle that is well-illustrated with Babylon and their coming oppressors in vv.6-8. What is that principle, and how is it illustrated in these verses?
  
5. What is the first stated “woe” against Babylon (vv.6-8)? Of *what*, specifically, is Babylon accused?
  
6. The second “woe” against Babylon is found in vv.9-11. The first woe dealt with *what* Babylon had done; this concerns itself with *why* or *to what purpose/intent* Babylon had acted. What was this *purpose*?
  
7. The third “woe” against Babylon is found in vv.12-14. It addresses *how* or *the method* Babylon used toward its purpose. What *purpose(s)* does this woe identify?
  
8. The fourth “woe” against Babylon is found in vv.15-17. Though Babylon had *taken by force* from their neighbors (nations), and mightily abused them as *slaves* to build their own empire, what further sin is identified in this particular *woe*?
  
9. The fifth “woe” against Babylon is found in vv.18-20. It regards the sin of *idolatry*. How is this *woe* tied or related to the previous four “woes”?



### **Lesson 3, Habakkuk 3:1–19**

#### ***The Prophet's Prayer of Faith***

I have never been able to develop much of an interest in poetry, though admittedly, I haven't worked very hard at cultivating such endeavors. But from those who do have such an appreciation, and especially those who appreciate *biblical* poetry, I read that many of them consider Habakkuk 3 to be one of the most beautiful psalms in all of the sacred text. Though called a "prayer" in v.1, it is a type of poem called a "dithyramb" (the Hebrew word "*shigionoth*" {shig-gaw-yone) is of uncertain meaning, but appears to refer to *reeling* or *staggering* as a *drunk* would, and seems to be indicative of the *wild, rapid, changes of movement/emotion* of this prayerful psalm). This type of poetry springs from a strong emotional pressure that produces an almost wild and tempestuous style of triumphant expression. It is often characterized, and seems to be in this case, by rapid changes of emotion, rhythm, and pace.

Habakkuk has questioned the Lord and received answers from Him concerning the fate of Judah and Babylon. Judah will indeed be punished and the wicked destroyed (cf. 1:5-11a), but "*the righteous will live by his faith*" (cf. 2:4b). Babylon, though an instrument used by the Lord to punish, will itself be humbled because of its arrogant pride and excesses (cf. 2:4a,5-19). **Now, Habakkuk understands.** He has been in an extreme state of emotional agitation and unrest, and this state has now wrung from him the confession of his fear, "*I have heard the report about Thee and I fear*" (cf. 3:2). It is from this strange combination of perplexity, confusion, and then understanding, that the extreme emotion of this poetical psalm of **both fear and faith** come forth. It truly is, even to the non-poetical among us, an amazing journey to behold.

#### **I. His Petition: *Revive Thy works, and in wrath remember mercy, 3:1-2***

From v.1, a couple things should be noted. First, as mentioned before, this poetical psalm takes form in prayer to Jehovah. Such is the case of most of David's psalms also. Secondly, note the phrase, "*According to Shigionoth.*" The Hebrew word translated as *Shigionoth* comes from "shiggayown" or "shiggayonah." It is found in the O.T. only here and in the inscription portion of Psalm 7. Though it is variously defined, or acknowledged as being of unknown derivation and meaning, the general consensus of those who do define the term seems to be that it indicates the type or style of poetical writing which follows (a *dithyramb*, as described above), rather than a person, or some other dedication. Thus, the marginal reading of the NASB gives us, "a highly emotional poetic form." The point of which is this: Habakkuk has been in an emotional pressure cooker of confusion about what he sees compared to his understanding of God. When given the "complete picture" of what is about to happen to Judah and Babylon, understanding is achieved, but great fear comes also. From this emotionally-charged state, Habakkuk's *faith* leads him to confess his *fear*, and plead that *mercy* may temper the execution of the Lord's judgment.

After the inscription of the previous verse, v.2 begins Habakkuk's poetical prayer. The prophet first acknowledges his reception of the "*the report,*" which is a reference to the divine answers Jehovah has given to his questions. The marginal reading in

the NASB even renders the phrase as “*Thy report.*” But in admitting his reception and even comprehension of what the Lord has said will indeed happen concerning Judah and Babylon, the prophet also confesses the *fear* it has brought upon him. Instead of “*fear*”, the RSV renders the phrase as “*I stand in awe of You.*” Either way, the prophet has heard and understood (to the degree possible) what God had to say in answer to his questions, and those answers renew his faith in Jehovah while at the same time causing him to tremble at the now revealed future. This *fear* causes Habakkuk to make a request, “*O Lord, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.*” There are several things that must be properly understood concerning this request before continuing with the rest of the prayerful poem:

1. Habakkuk’s plea to “*revive Thy work*” seems to refer to the Lord’s *work of purpose* with, for, and through the Jewish people. Habakkuk appeals to God to remember His own plans for them.
2. The phrase “*in the midst of years*” refers to the then present time. God has now announced His intentions to Habakkuk, but has not fully carried out the planned punishment of Judah (or of Babylon). Thus, *in the midst* means the time between the announcement and its fruition.
3. “*In wrath remember mercy*” is the prophet’s plea for his people. Habakkuk, despite his desire for the punishment of the wicked, perhaps fears that in His wrath Jehovah might destroy Judah completely.

This *introductory* portion of chp.3 sets the stage for all that follows within the body of the poem.

## II. **Recounting the Lord’s previous works for the salvation of His people, 3:3-15**

The poem is in the overall form of a *theophany*- a visible manifestation of God. Habakkuk sees God coming to punish the wicked, and thereby save the righteous, as He has throughout their history. Thus, excerpts from Israel’s history are cited in which God has come, in various forms of *nature*, *pestilence*, and *plague*, from various places (*Teman*, *Mount Paran*, *Cush*, and *Midian*) to act in behalf of His people.

In vv.3-4, God is presented as the *radiant sunlight* shining forth over the mountainous regions about *Teman* and from over *Mount Paran*. *Teman* was in Edom, about halfway between the south end of the Dead Sea and the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqabah. *Mount Paran* was a plateau area west of Edom. Both of these would be southeast of Judah. And since Palestine was/is above the equator, the region of Edom- including *Teman* and *Mount Paran* would likely be the general area from which the sun would arise to shine on Judah. So, God would rise like the sun to shine on His people in judgment of the wicked and salvation for the righteous!

The last phrase of v.4 is, “*and there is the hiding of His power.*” The “*there*” portion refers to the origin of His *radiance*- from His *hand*. But as the brilliance of the sun’s radiance prevents one from truly “seeing” the power of the sun, so too it is with God. The brightness of His glory prevents one from truly seeing, or comprehending, His

true power and might, cf. 2Cor.3:7-13. It is indeed a wonderfully beautiful and awe-inspiring comparison!

The *manifestations* of God's power utilized by Habakkuk in vv.5-6 are drawn from history. Surely the references to "*pestilence*" and "*plague*" would call Judah's attention back to Egypt where Jehovah used both to free His people from Pharaoh's hand. As God has done before in Egypt, He will do again in Judah and Babylon (for the *post-exilic captives*). Surely Jehovah's power is not limited to Egypt since He "*surveyed the earth*" and "*looked and startled the nations.*" Yet another image of God's eternal power is shown in the next phrases, "*the perpetual mountains were shattered, the ancient hills collapsed.*" Indeed, "*His ways are everlasting.*" What God's people, and the world for that matter, have seen from Him in the past, they will see again regarding Judah and Babylon. The wicked will be held accountable, and the faithful will be preserved.

There is significance to the two nations mentioned in v.7 as being recipients of God's vengeful power. *Cushan* is the lengthened form of *Cush*, also known as Ethiopia. It was brought "*under distress*" when its capitol city, Thebes, was destroyed by Ashurbanipal (king of Assyria) in 663 B.C. (see Nah.3:8-10). God's power was manifested in/through the city's destruction despite them being *helped* by Ethiopia, Egypt, Put, and Lubim (probably Libya). The *Midianites* are also mentioned. Remember that God destroyed this innumerable horde with Gideon and three hundred men (see Judges 7)! As Egypt and Midian had afflicted God's people and been punished for it, so too now would those who oppress and afflict the righteous ones of Judah- both from within and without, be "*under distress*" and "*trembling.*"

A series of rhetorical questions are asked in v.8 to show that God sometimes used/uses the *forces of nature* to accomplish His purposes. God did not "*rage against*" the rivers, or manifest His "*wrath against the sea.*" He utilized both of these *forces of nature* to punish the Egyptians (turning the Nile to blood and closing the Red Sea upon Pharaoh's army). Through these elements of the natural world, God rode on "*horses*" and "*chariots*" of judgment upon Egypt to the purpose of salvation for Israel, cf. Psalm 77:11-20. Great is His power!

The *bow* of v.9 being "*made bare*" indicates that it was taken out of its sheath for usage. As God has been shown to avenge the oppression of His people with the *arsenal* of nature in the past, now He readies His *bow* for current action. The next phrase, "*the rods of chastisement were sworn*" has given considerable difficulty to commentators. One of them (Delitzsch) is said to have listed over one hundred different interpretations of it. If the scholars are that divided over its meaning, I hesitate to speculate. Therefore, I'll quote Hailey, "The prophet apparently has in mind God's promise to the tribes, "*For I will lift up My hand to heaven, and say, as I live for ever...I will render vengeance to mine adversaries, and will recompense them that hate me. I will make mine arrows drunk with blood, and My sword shall devour flesh*" (Deut.32:40-42). This oath given through Moses will be "a sure word"; it will be kept even now against the Chaldeans." (Commentary on the Minor Prophets; p.292). With this interpretation I cannot disagree, or add anything further.

Since there is a “*Selah*” (of indefinite meaning, but thought to indicate a pause) in the middle of v.9, perhaps “*Thou didst cleave the earth with rivers*” should be in, and connected with, v.10. The whole verse seems to be descriptive of nature’s part in the activity of God- either it is the *implement* of His destruction as seen previously in vv.4,8, or it is *influenced* greatly by His activity as in vv.6,10. Thus, the *cleaving of the rivers* is but another analogy indicative of God’s magnificent power. He created the rivers *in* (or *cleaving to*) the earth originally; and with the *quaking* and *collapsing* of mountains that God is said to cause, new rivers might even be formed, v.10b. Therefore all of nature- the *sun, moon, stars, mountains, seas, and rivers*, obey Him, v.11 (see also Josh.10:12-13 where at the prayerful request of Joshua, the sun and moon stood still to allow additional time to defeat the Amorites). Surely such power as creates nature and receives obedience from it, is able to punish the wicked and deliver the righteous, vv.12-13a!

In the last half of v.13, a prophecy is given toward the “*head of the house*” being struck and laid “*open from the thigh to the neck.*” Though perhaps Judah would be caused to think of past kings that God has struck in behalf of His people such as Pharaoh, or even any of several of the “kings” of Canaan who were similarly struck down by Jehovah, this passage actually refers prophetically to the Chaldean king. Remember the context of Habakkuk: it has to do with Judah’s punishment at the hands of the Chaldeans, and the subsequent punishment of Chaldeans for their excesses of arrogance and violence. Some versions translate the NASV’s “*thigh*” as “*foundation*”- either way the meaning is the same. From the *bottom to the top* God has and would destroy those who oppress “*the salvation of Thine anointed.*”

Again in v.14 there is the tendency to look both *back* and *forward* in time. In many cases of Israel’s history, their enemies had “*pierce(d) with his own spears the head of his warriors.*” The Midianites serve as an excellent example of such, cf. Judges 7:22ff. This would also be the case for the Chaldeans. The Medes had combined forces with Chaldea to defeat the city of Nineveh. But Jehovah would turn the Medes against Chaldea to destroy them, cf. Jer.51:11,28. Thus, Chaldea would be *pierced with his own spears!* Though they had “*stormed in to scatter*” Judah, the Lord would “*tread on the sea with Thy horses*” and “*on the surge of many waters*” destroy them with the *spear* of the Medes. The *waters* of the Red Sea, the Jordan River, and the River Kishon (cf. Judges 4:7; and 1Kings 18:40) all testify to what God *had* done as a pledge of what was to come.

### **III. Habakkuk trembles at the coming punishment, but expresses faithful confidence in the Lord’s deliverance, 3:16-19**

Beginning with v.16, the poetical poem takes a dramatic turn in tempo and tenor (hence, a *dithyramb*). The adrenaline rush of emotional excitement, and the agitated spirit of perplexity, now gives way to the **calm assurance of faith**. Note Hailey’s comments to introduce this section:

“The prophet had heard through the ears of a waiting servant; he had seen through the eyes of an honest inquirer; he had accepted and made known as a true prophet of God who receives his message from Him, and he was now ready for whatever may come. This reaction was not that of one who would run away,

but of one who “*must quietly wait for the day of trouble.*” (Commentary on the Minor Prophets; pp.294-295)

Habakkuk had questioned the Lord and received answers. Now his former **perplexity** and **confusion** gives way to **faithful assurance** and **trust**. However, his faith and assurance does not completely dispel the fear and dread of that which the Lord has testified would come- as v.16 clearly attests!

But the tremendous faith that has grown and swelled in the bosom of the prophet throughout this experience is clearly manifested in v.17. In this verse Habakkuk succinctly identifies virtually every available avenue of food supply for Judah (and himself!). His conclusion, in v.18, is that even though Judah’s punishment might include all food supplies being cut off or destroyed by the Chaldeans, “**Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.**” What began as a *questioning* of Jehovah and His ways in the first two chapters has grown magnificently into tremendous **faith, trust, and fidelity** at last!

Habakkuk concludes this wonderful journey of doubt and perplexity to faith and trust with these words of v.19, “**The Lord God is my strength, and He has made my feet like hinds’ feet, and makes me walk on my high places.**” As the capable deer is able to scale the rocky crags to the mountaintop, the prophet has now come to the *high places* of faith and trust. Such is the pattern for all since to follow!

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### **Habakkuk 3:1-19 Study/Discussion Questions**

1. What is a “dithyramb,” and does “*Shigionoth*” mean? How are these terms related to this chapter?
  
2. What was Habakkuk’s initial reaction to the Lord’s “*report*,” and why?
  
3. Please explain what each of these phrases from v.2b mean:
  - a. “*revive Thy work*”-
  
  - b. “*in the midst of the years*”-
  
  - c. “*in wrath remember mercy*”-

4. From vv.3-4, why is God said to come from *Teman* and *Mount Paran*?
5. To what do “*pestilence and plague*” likely refer in v.5?
6. What is being emphasized in v.6 with “*perpetual mountains*” and “*ancient hills*”?
7. In vv.8-15, various *forces of nature* are specifically mentioned. What is the point of these illustrations? (And, how are these verses connected to v.2?)
8. How does Habakkuk describe his *bodily reaction* to God’s answers to his questions in v.16? Why does he say he reacted this way?
9. What *physical hardships* does Habakkuk seem to expect in v.17? How does he expect to react to them in v.18?
10. Use 1:1-4 and 1:12 – 2:1 and 3:19 to describe Habakkuk’s *journey of faith* as chronicled in this book.
11. Now that we’ve completed our study of Habakkuk, what lessons have YOU learned from it?