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THE LOOKOUT

AUGUST 2023

Unit: Minor Prophets (Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk)

Theme: Justice Will Come

Overview: People cry out for justice when justice has been violated. Perhaps that indicates we all have an innate sense of fairness, honesty, lawfulness, and integrity built into us by our Creator. We seem to know that no one gets away with behaving unjustly forever and that only a fair and impartial judge can judge correctly. We all want justice—until it is imposed upon us. Then we want to avoid justice at all costs. The pre-exilic, seventh-century prophets Nahum, Zephaniah, and Habakkuk will help enlighten us that God will someday right all wrongs—even wrongs we have committed against him.

HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.

Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.

Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF AUGUST 13, 2023

LESSON AIM: **Though some seem to
escape justice, rest assured
their wicked deeds betray
them even now.**

UNIT: Minor Prophets (Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk)

THEME: Justice Will Come

LESSON TEXT: Habakkuk 1:12-17; 2:1-20

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Psalm 7:10-17; Matthew 12:18-21

WHERE IS THE JUSTICE?

BY MARK SCOTT

A silly outline for Habakkuk's *oracle* might look like this:

1. Hello (Habakkuk 1:1-4)?
2. No Way (1:5-11)!
3. Say What (1:12-2:1)?
4. Chill (2:2-20).
5. Whoa, Dude (3:1-19)!

Habakkuk allows us into his prayer closet. First the prophet says, "Hello! God, are you paying attention?" God replies, "No way! Yes, I am paying attention, and I am going to do something about it by using Babylon." Habakkuk says, "What? You're going to punish Judah by using a nation worse than Judah?" God says, "Chill. Babylon will get theirs." Finally, the prophet says, "Whoa, I didn't see that coming. God you are awesome!"

Habakkuk and Jeremiah were contemporaries. As such, Habakkuk was trying to get Judah ready for Babylonian captivity, which ultimately occurred in 586 BC. God's people were steeped in idolatry, immorality, greed, and violence. God revealed to Habakkuk that he was going to bring justice to Judah but that he was going to do so via the nation of Babylon. This confused Habakkuk, for he struggled with God's sense of justice.

God's Got This

Habakkuk 1:12-17

Habakkuk had a problem with the seeming inactivity of God in ignoring Judah's evil (1:1-4). He must have wondered, "Is God asleep?" But when God revealed his plan to punish Judah via the wicked nation of Babylon, Habakkuk suddenly had a problem with the activity of God (1:5-11). God had to remind the prophet that the Lord's justice was in place, and he was in total control.

Habakkuk was aware that a holy God could not look on evil or stand in the presence of sin. God is eternal and cannot *tolerate wrongdoing*. Habakkuk's sense of justice begged the question, "How could God use Babylon to punish Judah since Babylon was so evil?" Scripture used the word *wicked* (given to misery or mischief) to describe that nation. Babylon worshipped the fish gods. Archaeologists have found carvings, drawings, and mosaics of such. Notice the fishing vocabulary in the text (*fish, sea, sea creatures, hooks, net, and dragnet*). Like a net full of fish that is dumped out, Babylon was dumping out its destruction on the nations of the world. Habakkuk needed assurance that God would do something about it. But

none of Babylon's wickedness had escaped the watchful eye of God—as Habakkuk 2 shows.

Babylon Will Get What For

Habakkuk 2:1-20

To help Habakkuk with his "justice dilemma," God informed the prophet of the evils of Babylon. The time eventually would come when God would punish Babylon for their wickedness. God wanted to be very clear about the *revelation* of Babylon's destruction. They would "get theirs." This message of judgment would be made public (made *plain on tablets*). Even a runner (herald) would be able to read it as he ran. Babylon would be *puffed up* with unholy *desires* (i.e., desires that are *not upright*). But God's people (the righteous), in contrast, *will live by his faithfulness*. This significant text later is used by Paul in Romans 1:17.

The bulk of Habakkuk 2 concerns the sins of Babylon. A careful reading of it shows that the Babylonians broke almost all the Ten Commandments. Specific sins reappear in a rhythm. For instance, stealing and materialism are mentioned in verses 6 and 9. Bloodshed (murder or violence) is mentioned in verses 5, 8, 12, and 17. Drunkenness is mentioned in verses 5, 15, and 16. Idolatry is mentioned in verses 18 and 19 and implied in other verses. There are at least five "woes" to Babylon and their leaders (in vv. 6, 9, 12, 15, and 19). Things do not look good for them.

God's retribution against Babylon will set the record straight in terms of justice. The *creditors* (the people who charge interest) will rise up against Babylon. They will make them *tremble* (quiver or quake). They will become *prey* for other nations. Said more bluntly, "*Because you have plundered many nations, the people who are left will plunder you.*" The violence Babylon inflicted upon others will be returned in kind (v. 17). Babylon's worthless idols cannot save them, for those idols cannot speak, come to life, or give guidance.

In contrast to Babylon's punishment, God's people must live by faith (v. 4), fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord (v. 14), and have a respectful silence before the Lord in his temple (v. 20). God responded to Habakkuk's complaints about justice. God's answers differed from what Habakkuk expected. Habakkuk's perspective of justice had to change. But in the end, he could say, "Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Habakkuk 3:18). ■

APPLICATION

WOULD EVERYONE PLEASE BE QUIET?

BY DAVID FAUST

Composer Wolfgang Mozart once observed, “The music is not in the notes, but in the silence between.” The problem is, I’m not good at being silent. What about you?

The Lord says, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10), not “Be loud and pretend that you are God.”

In John’s vision of God’s dwelling place, “there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (Revelation 8:1), but here on earth we’re seldom silent for five minutes—even in church. Does your congregation spend much time worshipping together in silence? Are there times in your services for quiet prayers that say, “Father, we love you because . . .”?

Do you build quietness into your daily schedule? The Bible says, “Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life” (1 Thessalonians 4:11), but how can we do that in hectic times when so much is going on? Does the Lord really expect us to shut off our TVs and laptops, power down our cell phones, quit talking so much, and be still in his presence? Yes, I believe he does.

Questions Abound

The prophet Habakkuk asked God a good question: “How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen?” (Habakkuk 1:2). Has your patience ever worn thin and you asked the Lord, *When will this problem finally be resolved? How long will it take before you respond to my prayers?*

In his frank dialogue with the Almighty, Habakkuk had more complaints to express. “Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing?” (v. 3). Maybe you have asked questions like those, too. *Lord, why is there so much injustice in the world? Why don’t you intervene and fix everything?*

Sometimes the answers don’t come until we stop talking and listen.

Silence Is Golden

According to Mark Twain, “The right word may be effective, but no word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause.” Habakkuk 2:20 is a rightly timed pause. In the middle of his questions and complaints, Habakkuk paused and wrote, “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.”

When the Lord spoke, his answers weren’t what the Jewish people wanted to hear. God’s justice would be satisfied, but the divine plan included allowing the Babylonians to attack Jerusalem and take the Jews into exile. God’s revealed message “will not prove false” (Habakkuk 2:3), but while awaiting its fulfillment, his people must live by faith (v. 4).

It’s difficult to hear God’s voice when our lives are noisy and cluttered. “In quietness and trust is your strength” (Isaiah 30:15). When we come before the Lord in hushed reverence, we discover God is faithful even when life is unfair, and he can be trusted even when nothing seems to be going right.

After Habakkuk got his questions off his chest, he wrote, “Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior” (Habakkuk 3:17-18). We can offer that kind of prayer, too, if we quiet down enough to recognize that the greatest treasure isn’t money in the bank or food on the table, but the joy of the Lord in our hearts.

Personal Challenge: This week, set aside an hour to be silent and listen to the Lord. ■

DISCOVERY

BY MICHAEL C. MACK

1. Over the past week, did you have any conversations with someone who does not know God, does not know him well, or has some distorted image of him? If so, how did you use God's Word to give them an accurate portrayal of God?
2. When have you had to wait on God for an answer?

Ask two people to read aloud **Habakkuk 1:12-17; 2:1-20** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passage.

3. With what questions was Habakkuk wrestling?
 - In your own words, how did God answer him?
 - As you look at this passage as a whole, how do you see God's ultimate control of the circumstances?
4. God had appointed Babylon to punish Judah for their evil. Why was that a problem for Habakkuk?
5. How did Habakkuk view his role and responsibility in God's plan?
 - How was his relationship with God intertwined in that?
6. How is the enemy (Babylon) described?
 - How would God bring retribution on them? (*See, for instance, 2:6-8, 14.*)
 - Why could their idols not save them?
7. What do you learn about God's sovereignty from this passage?
 - What do you learn about yourself? (*What do you learn about the need to wait patiently—and perhaps silently—for God to act?*)
8. How specifically will you be a herald (a messenger or one who proclaims good news) to the people around you this week?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."
10. What do you need from God to be able to wait on him, trust his timing, and allow him to be in complete control of your life this week?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **Zephaniah 2:1-15**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts as well as the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■