



**WHEN
THE
GROUND
FEELS
SOFT**

Studies in Habakkuk

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Faith Applied

Study 1 • Habakkuk 1:1-11

Faith In Confusion

Habakkuk is one of the Minor Prophets. The Minor Prophets are twelve small books located at the end the Old Testament. Each book is named after a prophet – a messenger of God. The Minor Prophets are easy to overlook and are sometimes difficult to understand.

The book of Habakkuk is a *Minor* Prophet, but its message is of *major* importance. While it was originally written for a specific time in the history of Ancient Israel, it is also a timeless word for all Christians who want to build their house on the rock (Matthew 7:24-27).

Habakkuk was probably written during the reign of King Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim was a wicked king who turned from God and undid all the good, godly changes his father had made. When Jehoiakim was king, the Assyrian empire was the greatest power in tohe region. However, its power was declining and a new empire, Babylon, was on the rise. Politically and socially, it was an unsettled time.

Rather than standing securely on solid rock, Habakkuk felt as though the ground beneath his feet was growing soft and falling away. What was God doing? Why didn't he set things right?

This prophecy doesn't feel like a proclamation to be announced. Instead, it feels more like a conversation—even a debate—with God, which we're allowed to listen to.

How does someone live by faith in a world of chaos, violence, and injustice?



Thought Starter

1) What's one time when you've felt confused with God, or with life in general?

How did you process your confusion?

“ ”

“In our address to God we like to speak to him as we think we ought to speak, and there are times when our words far outrun our feelings. But it is best that we should be perfectly frank before him. He will allow us to say anything we will, so long as it is to himself. ‘I will say unto God, my rock,’ exclaims the Psalmist, ‘why hast thou forgotten me?’ If he had said, ‘Lord, thou canst not forget. Thou hast graven my name on the palms of thy hands,’ he would have spoken more worthily, but less truly.”

David MacIntyre – *The Hidden Life of Prayer*

Habakkuk is ‘perfectly frank’ as he brings his confusion before God in fervent prayer.

“ ”



Prayer Starter

Dear Father,

As we embark on this study of your Word, we ask that you would speak to us. We know that you are the perfect, righteous, powerful God who loves us with an everlasting love, but sometimes we are confused and struggle to understand your ways.

Please use these studies to strengthen us so that we will stand firm in our faith and so that we will build our lives on you, our God, the Rock.

Amen



Digging Deeper

Before we start with Habakkuk, we're going to consider the words of another prophet who lived around the same time. Jeremiah spoke against the social and religious mess that developed under King Jehoiakim.

Read Jeremiah 22:13-17 and Jeremiah 23:10-11.

2) What things does Jeremiah describe that would break God's heart?

How do we see those things in our society today? What about in our church? What about in our personal lives?

How much do these things break our hearts? Or are we just used to them?

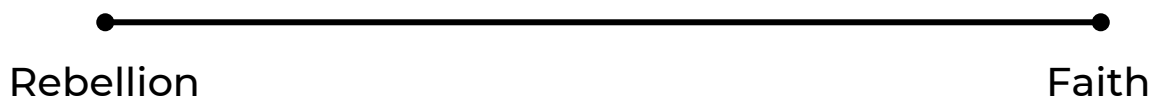
3) Habakkuk begins with a bold challenge directed to God.

Read Habakkuk 1:1-4.

What things does he see around him that cause him confusion and distress?

What do you think Habakkuk means when he says, “Therefore the law is paralysed”? (v4)

4) Do you think Habakkuk's challenge is a rebellion against God, a display of his faith in God, or a bit of both? On the scale below, mark where you think it falls, then write down why you think that.



Prayers like Habakkuk's are found throughout the Bible. In Psalm 13, King David pours out his heart to God without holding back. Job, a righteous man who experienced great pain, speaks to God with surprising boldness (Job 13:20-25).

Jeremiah, who suffered immensely as God's prophet, challenges God's justice (Jeremiah 12:1-4). And in the book of Revelation, those who have been killed because of their faith in Jesus ask, "How Long, Sovereign Lord..." (Revelation 6:9-11).

All of these are demonstrations of faith in confusion. Where else can these people run – who else can they trust – when everything around them seems to be in chaos?

5) The Lord responds to Habakkuk's challenge. But his answer is not what Habakkuk was hoping for and certainly not what he was expecting.

Read verses 5-6.

What is God going to do? And why would it surprise Habakkuk?

6) The Lord describes the terror of the Babylonian army that he is raising up and sending in judgement upon Israel.

Read verses 6-10.

What images stand out and how does it make you feel?

How do you think Habakkuk felt after hearing God's response?

What do you think Habakkuk should do after hearing God's response?

Here's a tough question...

Habakkuk prays and God answers - just not the way he might have expected. How do you wrestle with the idea that we're called to pray, but that God already has his plans and will answer our prayers in his own way?

7) Read verses 7-11.

Can you detect any glimmer of hope in these verses?

8) Sometimes we can feel like Habakkuk – we're confused about why life feels out of control and why everything seems to be working against us. Having read this conversation between Habakkuk and God, what seems to be the best way forward when we find ourselves in these situations?

9) Jesus, just like us, faced moments where his life seemed to be overwhelmed by chaos and confusion.

Read Matthew 26:36-45.

What sustained Jesus' faith in this, his darkest hour?

Making It Real

10) Write down some of your confusions – some of the things that are happening in your life where you don't know what God is doing.

Now write a prayer where you give these things over to God. Follow the example of Habakkuk in verses 1-4 – be passionate, and don't be afraid to challenge God.

The Lord, through the prophet Isaiah, addresses those who had been captured by the Babylonians and taken into exile. They were in a place of confusion, but the Lord assures them...

*'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.
When you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned;
the flames will not set you ablaze.
For I am the LORD your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.'*
(Isaiah 43:1-3)

We walk by faith, even in confusion.

Study 2 · Habakkuk 1:12-2:1

Faith That Cries Out

In our last study, Habakkuk took his confusion to God. Violence and injustice were everywhere around him, so why didn't God do something? Why wouldn't he answer Habakkuk's prayer?

The Lord responded in a shocking way – telling Habakkuk that he was going to send a Babylonian army to bring his judgement upon the people of Ancient Israel.

Instead of resolving Habakkuk's confusion, God's answer makes him even more confused and so he cries out to God again. He doesn't hold back. He expresses his bewilderment, and he even challenges whether God is acting consistently.

Does Habakkuk go too far with his this second 'complaint', or is he still expressing a faith that is seeking understanding?



Thought Starter

1) Think of a time when something went really wrong, and it had a big impact on your life, but you didn't want to make a complaint or say anything about it. What happened and why didn't you want to make a complaint?

Under what circumstances would you have made a complaint or said something about that situation?

“ ”

“I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day.”

Abraham Lincoln

“ ”



Prayer Starter

Take some time to quieten your heart and humble your spirit before God. Then, when you're ready, tell God all the reasons why you're glad that you can call him Father. If you're doing this study in a group, have a short time of simple one sentence prayers.



Digging Deeper

2) Read verses 12-13a.

List the different ways that Habakkuk speaks about God's character and, next to each item, write down why you think he chooses to use this term in this situation.

Why does Habakkuk begin his second plea by saying what he already knows about God's character?

In the NIV 2011 translation of verse 12 it says, *"you will never die."* However, that line originally said, *"we shall not die."*

The difference arises because Ancient Hebrew scribes wrote comments in their manuscripts saying that the line should be read as *"you shall not die."* They did this because they wanted to emphasise God's immortality instead of showing how Habakkuk expresses his understanding of God's promises.

While some translations, like the NIV 2011, use *"you,"* there's no strong evidence to support this translation. It's better to read the text as, *"we shall not die."*

3) Why does it matter that Habakkuk says 'we shall not die' in this address to God?

What promises of God could Habakkuk be referring to when he says, '*we shall not die*'?

4) Read verse 13.

Write your own version of what Habakkuk is trying to say in this verse.

Habakkuk's 'Why God?' question is one that we all ask at some point in time. How do you deal with that question when it comes up in your life?

“ ”

“[People] of faith are always the [people] that have to confront problems. Blot out God, and your problems are indeed all ended. If there is no God in heaven, then we have no problem about sin and suffering... But the moment that you admit the existence of an all-powerful governing God, you are face to face with your problems. If you say that you have none, I question the strength of your faith.”

G. Campbell Morgan – ‘The Minor Prophets’

“ ”

5) Habakkuk feels the injustice of, *‘the wicked [the Babylonians] swallowing up those more righteous than themselves [his fellow Israelites]’*. Why do you think he says this?

Given what the Bible says elsewhere about the Israelites, do you think his comment is fair?

6) Read verses 14-17.

Habakkuk uses vivid words to paint a picture of the Babylonian conquests. Draw this picture in the space below.



For us, the Babylonians are ancient history, but can you identify yourself in any part of the picture you just drew? If you can, mark where you think you are. Then explain, “Why did you put yourself in that spot?”



7) The Babylonians are seemingly an unstoppable force drunk on their own strength.

Read Habakkuk 1:7, 1:11, and 1:16.

How would you describe their attitude? How would you expect God to respond to such an attitude?

8) In our next study we'll see God's response to Habakkuk's challenge and the wickedness of the Babylonians but, for now, **read Habakkuk 2:1.**

Having boldly cried out to God, what does Habakkuk now say he will do?

Imagine the scene Habakkuk is describing in this metaphor. What characteristics do we see in him as he waits?

9) If we boldly cry out to God with our concerns, how might that be:

a) a blessing that strengthens our faith?

b) a hindrance that threatens to weaken our faith?

What's the crucial difference between these two responses?



Making It Real

10) What are you waiting on God for at the moment?

How faithful do you think you are being at 'standing watch' and waiting?

How can we encourage one another to be, (1) more at peace and (2) more vigilant as we wait upon the Lord?

Shortly after he was born, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord...

There was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him.

...Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God saying:

*“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel”*
(Luke 2:25-32)

The Lord is faithful to his promises and watches over his people.

Study 3 • Habakkuk 2:2-20

Faith Seeking Justice

Three words that changed the world...

Three Hebrew words (or eight in the New International Version translation of the Bible)...

'The righteous person shall live by his faithfulness'
(Habakkuk 2:4b)

Martin Luther was a German monk who became a central figure in the Protestant Reformation that took place in Europe in the 16th century. He was desperately trying to earn a right standing before God but, despite his religious passion and his many efforts to fulfil God's law, he felt like he had no hope... until these three words hit his heart.

Luther's son wrote about what happened. His father (who was still a monk) was in Rome, climbing a set of stairs on his knees so that he could enter heaven quicker after he died. But, *"As he repeated his prayers on the Lateran staircase, the words of the prophet Habakkuk came suddenly to his mind, 'The just shall live by faith'. Thereupon he ceased his prayers, returned to [his hometown], and took this as the chief foundation of all his doctrine."* The world has not been the same since.

These three words sit at the heart of Habakkuk's prophecy and at the heart of our understanding of the gospel.



Thought Starter

1) If God gave you a vision of the future, what would you like to see happening?

Does a desire for justice have any impact on your answer?

Habakkuk cried out to the Lord, asking why he wasn't doing anything about all the injustice amongst his people. God responded by saying, 'I've heard you. Be amazed. The Babylonians are coming to execute judgement'.

Habakkuk is stunned by this news and boldly challenges the Lord. He struggles to understand how God's answer fits with his character and his commitment to justice. Despite his concerns, though, Habakkuk decides to trust the Lord and waits expectantly for his response.

Our passage today, Habakkuk 2:2-20, is God's response. We'll see the Lord declaring his commitment to justice – particularly in relation to the Babylonian invaders – and we'll also see how their sins are like our sins – because we also turn from God and try to build our own foundations using our own strength.



Prayer Starter

Dear Father,

Shape our hearts to be like yours.

Give us a heart for justice that is like your heart for justice.

Give us a heart for mercy and renewal that is based on what you have done for us through the cross.

When the ground feels soft beneath our feet, use these words from Habakkuk to help us depend even more upon Jesus, our Rock.

Amen



Digging Deeper

2) Habakkuk's waiting is over: The Lord speaks and gives him a new job to do.

Read verses 2-3.

What does Habakkuk have to do?

Why does he have to do it?

What's going to happen to God's message?

3) Read verses 4-5.

Here we see a contrast between two types of people. One group – “the enemy” – refers to the Babylonians. The other group are those that God considers righteous. List the characteristics of...

The Enemy

The Righteous

--

Habakkuk has asked God a lot of questions (1:2-3, 13). How might these two verses be an answer to his questions?

Verses 4 & 5 are God's essential answer to Habakkuk's challenges. They're the core statement of the entire prophecy.

In the verses that come next (6-20) the Lord announces five statements of 'woe' – a word used to express impending trouble and sadness. While these statements are about Babylon, they speak about injustices that are common to all humanity.

Each statement talks about a different expression of pride. Pride is elevating ourselves more than we should and going further than we should as we try to get something good. It's pursuing our own glory at the expense of others, without considering God and his commands.

4) In this section we'll **quickly** examine each of the five 'woes'.

For each one, **'Read'** the verses.

Then, look at the suggested **'Root Cause'** – what's causing injustice – and see whether you agree with it. (If you can think of a better way to say it, write it down.)

Then, consider what **'Effects'** that root cause will have.

Then, write down what **'Judgement'** God says he will bring against that sin.

Got it? Let's go!

Woe #1 (verses 6-8)

Root Cause

Effect

Judgement

Wealth at
any cost

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Woe #2 (verses 9-11)

Root Cause

Effect

Judgement

Security at
any cost

--	--	--

Woe #3 (verses 12-14)

Root Cause

Effect

Judgement

Power at
any cost

--	--	--

Woe #4 (verses 15-17)

Root Cause

Effect

Judgement

Pleasure at
any cost

--

Woe #5 (verses 18-20)

Root Cause

Effect

Judgement

Control over
life at any cost

--

5) Which of the sins expressed in the five 'woes' are you most vulnerable to?

--

How might you resist this temptation?

(For a hint, see verse 4).

--

6) In the middle of all these woes, we get this statement...

Read verse 14.

What significance does it have for the Babylonian invaders?

What about for the faithful remainder of God's people – people like Habakkuk?

What about for us when the ground feels soft in our lives?

7) Our passage closes with another statement...

Read verse 20.

What significance does this statement have for the Babylonian invaders?

What about for Habakkuk, in light of his 'debate' with God in chapter 1?

What about for us when the ground feels soft in our lives?

8) Habakkuk has questioned God's commitment to justice and his response to injustice. Meanwhile, those world-changing words in Habakkuk 2:4b are quoted three times in the New Testament, each time in relation to saving faith in Jesus.

Read Romans 1:16-17, Galatians 3:10-11, Hebrews 10:38-39.

What's the connection between God's commitment to justice and saving faith in Jesus?

“ ”

“God took justice so seriously that the second person of the Trinity took on a human nature, lived the life of a servant, and died on the cross, paying the debt to justice himself. Therefore we too must be passionate for justice!”

Timothy Keller – ‘Forgive – Why should I and how can I?’

“ ”



Making It Real

9) What injustices in our world cause you distress?

In light of what we've seen in Habakkuk, how should you respond?

What injustices are you committing in your own life that cause you and others distress?

In light of what we've seen in Habakkuk, how should you respond?

“ ”

“Though justice be thy plea, consider this: that in the course of justice none of us should see salvation. We do pray for mercy, and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy.”

William Shakespeare – 'The Merchant of Venice'

“ ”

Study 4 • Habakkuk 3:1-19

Faith Applied

There are some sayings that sound like blessings but are actually meant as curses. Here are three...

'May you live in interesting times'

'May you come to the attention of those in authority'

'May you find what you are looking for'

The prophet Habakkuk lived in interesting times. He drew the attention of the ultimate authority, God, who spoke to him directly about his questions and concerns. And in this final study we see that he eventually finds what he was looking for. So, was Habakkuk blessed or cursed?

Habakkuk began his prophecy feeling as though he was under a curse. The ground beneath his feet – his steadfast faith in the Lord – was growing soft. The world around him was filled with violence and injustice, and Habakkuk couldn't understand where God was or what he was doing.

Now, he's in an even worse place. He now knows that the Lord will send the Babylonians to bring judgement on Israel before they also face judgement for their wickedness.

Despite all this, Habakkuk ends his prophecy as someone who's been greatly blessed. He finishes as someone who's standing firmly on the solid rock of the Lord, who trusts God's promises. He chooses to live by faith (2:4). Indeed, his footing is so firm that he concludes his prophecy with prayer and praise.



Thought Starter

1) When you experience hard times and confusion, what happens to your prayer life?

What happens to your 'praise' life? Something similar or something different?

Horatio Spafford was a successful lawyer in Chicago. In 1873 his wife and four daughters set sail for Europe to have a summer holiday. On the fourth day their ship crashed.

Although his wife was rescued, his four daughters died.

When he heard, Horatio boarded a ship to join his wife in Europe. Four days into the voyage, the captain informed him that they were passing over the place where his daughters had died. It was there that he wrote these words of faith, that millions still sing today...

*Whatever my lot,
Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*



Prayer Starter

Almighty God,

You are good, and your love endures forever. You are our Rock and the hope of our salvation.

As we look at your Word, help us to acknowledge your majesty, affirm your goodness, and live our lives with joy for your glory.

Amen



Digging Deeper

2) In chapter 1 Habakkuk began by speaking directly to God in prayer. Now he's praying again, but his outlook has completely changed.

Read verses 1-2.

What does Habakkuk ask for here and how does it compare with what he asked for in chapter 1?

What do you think is motivating Habakkuk's latest prayer?

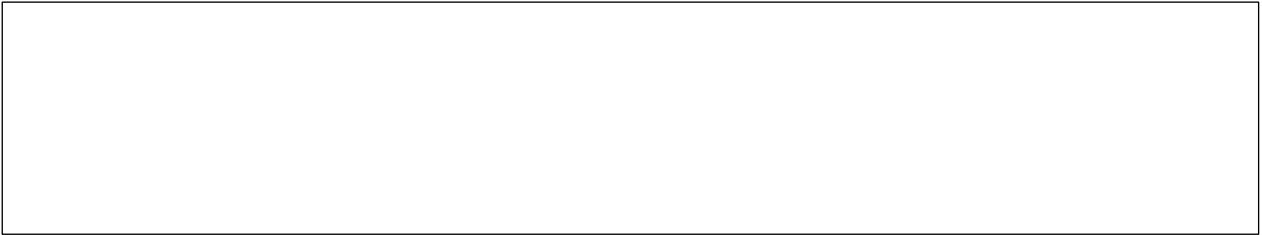
Rewrite Habakkuk's prayer (verse 2) in your own words and make it related to an issue in our world or your own life.

In Verses 3-15 Habakkuk uses a poetic style of writing to paint a majestic vision of the Lord coming in power and glory. His description includes references to the powerful works God has done for his people in the past, particularly the Exodus. For example, Teman and Mount Paran (Verse 3) are mountain ranges south of Israel. And Midian and Cushan (Verse 7) were towns on the route from Egypt to the Promised Land.

3) **Read verses 3-15** quickly and focus on the imagery. Let it impact your emotions and spirit. (If you're part of a small group, ask one of your members to do a dramatic reading for the rest of you.)

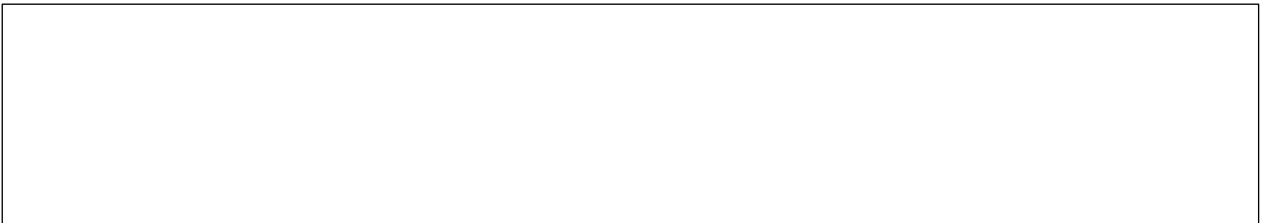
What impacted you?

How does this vision make you feel about the Lord and his coming?

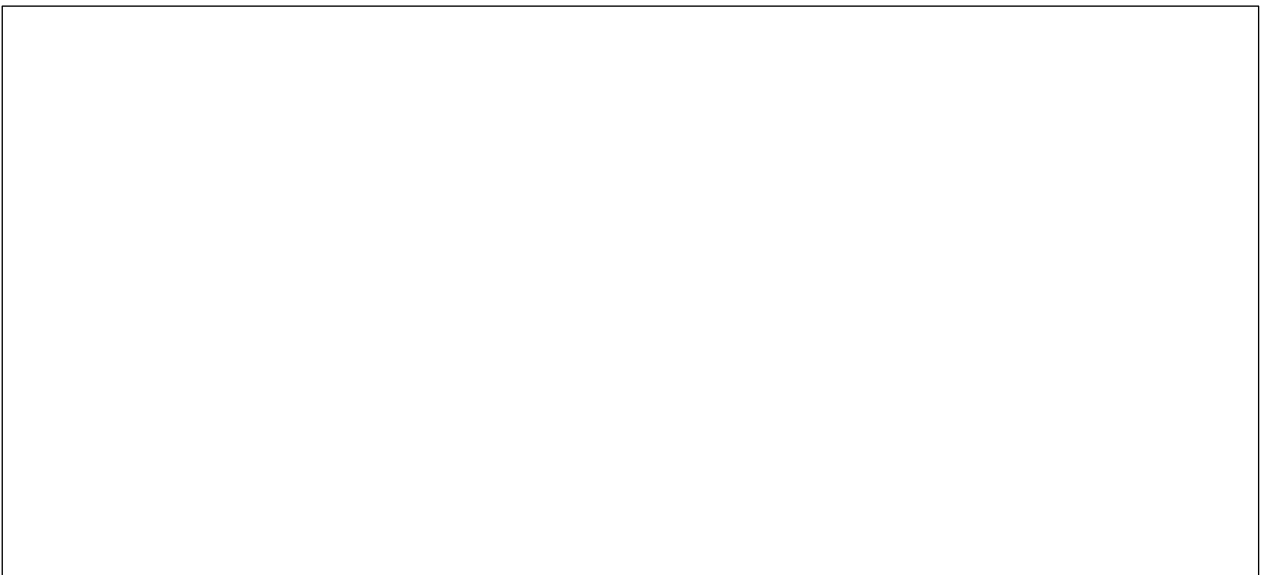


4) Read verses 3-15 again.

This time, write down the references you can see to God's work for his people in the past. Why does Habakkuk include these references?



5) Use these verses to try and draw an image of the Lord coming in power and glory. Don't worry about how good it is, just have a go!



6) We're told twice that God '*comes*' or '*goes out*' (verses 3 & 13). Why does he do that?

How do these verses related to our hope, our salvation, and our faith when life is confusing?

7) Habakkuk began by asking '*How long, O LORD!*' (Hab 1:2). He was told that the Babylonians were coming in judgement and that the Lord was also coming in judgement and salvation. Now we see his (very personal) responses to the Lord's coming.

Read verse 16.

Why do you think Habakkuk is so physically disturbed by what he's heard?

Habakkuk says that he will 'wait quietly'. What has changed in him compared to before? (See Hab 1:2, 1:13, 2:1, 2:4, 2:14, 2:20)

8) Read verses 17-19.

Habakkuk is learning to 'live by his faithfulness'. That means living in hope even when he faces incredibly difficult circumstances.

Why does Habakkuk now turn to joy and praise?

“ ”

“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.”

Hebrews 11:1-2

“ ”



Making It Real

9) *'The righteous person shall live by his faithfulness'*
(Habakkuk 2:4)

Write down three situations in your own life where you find it hard to live by faith.

Now, like Habakkuk,

A) Bring them to God boldly in prayer.

B) Humble yourself before God, acknowledging his wisdom, power, and commitment to justice.

C) Commit yourself to being watchful and thankful, as you wait to see how he works in your life.

D) Ask the Lord to revive his work in your life today, while you wait.

E) Give thanks for Jesus, through whom God has showed his judgement and mercy.

F) Rejoice in the Lord who is your Rock, your strength, and the God of your salvation.

We finish these studies, not with Habakkuk, but with Psalm 13 where David, using a lot less words, echoes the sentiments of Habakkuk.

*For the director of music. A psalm of David.
How long, LORD? Will you forget me for ever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
Look on me and answer, LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
and my enemy will say, 'I have overcome him,'
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.
But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me.
(Psalm 13:1-6)*

Praise God, our solid ground in all of life.



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