

Waiting on God for Revival: lessons from the book of Habakkuk

Many in the nation today are seeking God for revival, as in times past when the Spirit of God moved powerfully causing many to turn to the Lord.

Habakkuk is one of the very few books in the bible where revival is explicitly called for so what can this short book teach us about how to pray for revival in our day?

3:1-2 This prayer was sung by the prophet Habakkuk I have heard all about you, LORD. I am filled with awe by your amazing works. In this time of our deep need, revive us again as you did in years gone by. And in your anger, remember your mercy.

Persistent calling on God

1:2 How long, O LORD, must I call for help? But you do not listen!

In Habakkuk as well as in many other places in the bible and church history, it becomes clear that persistent prayer and calling on God even when there seems to be no answer, was a characteristic pre-requisite for a move of God. But why does God require such commitment. Is it because he is like the godless judge in the New Testament parable? (Luke 18:3-8). Jesus says no. In fact, he declares that God will avenge speedily. Even in this book the same point is made.

2:3....If it seems slow in coming, wait patiently, for it will surely take place. It will not be delayed

We will see in this book that there are reasons why God seems to delay. He has to deal with the sins in his own people which requires a repentance and response that isn't always forthcoming. It also tests the willingness to live a life of trusting in God's grace and faithfulness whatever the circumstances

2:4 Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked. But the righteous will live by their faithfulness to God.

But perhaps another reason is that only by consistently living a life of trusting God's faithfulness will we be prepared for the unexpected. Just as the righteous Simeon was able to recognise salvation in the child Jesus (Luke 2:25-30)

Prepare for a shock

1:5 The LORD replied, "Look around at the nations; look and be amazed! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn't believe even if someone told you about it.

For Habakkuk, his longing for God to deal with the 'strife, contention and perverted justice' in the nation is answered in a way that absolutely horrified him. God is going to use an evil and all-powerful adversary, the Babylonians, against them. The description given of them, may even sound relevant today!

*1:6-11 A cruel and violent people, they will march across the world and conquer other lands. They are notorious for their cruelty and do whatever they like.....
"On they come, all bent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind, sweeping captives ahead of them like sand. They scoff at kings and princes and scorn all their fortresses.....They sweep past like the wind and are gone. But they are deeply guilty, for their own strength is their god."*

Once they have conquered a nation, Habakkuk describes in the ‘five woes’ of chapter 2, how they gain personal wealth and maintain control through extortion, violence and corruption, even to the extent of using spiked alcohol to sexually abuse their own neighbours.

Sadly, much of this was also happening in Israel at the time, as graphically described in the book of Jeremiah, a contemporary of Habakkuk. It was as though the consequences of their sins were about to be heaped back on them.

Nevertheless, Habakkuk is still horrified at God’s tactics. Something must be done

1:12-13 O LORD my God, my Holy One, you who are eternal—surely you do not plan to wipe us out? O LORD, our Rock, you have sent these Babylonians to correct us, to punish us for our many sins. But you are pure and cannot stand the sight of evil. Will you wink at their treachery? Should you be silent while the wicked swallow up people more righteous than they?

The Lord’s watch

How should we respond when we see moral decline in God’s people today and even more so when it seems that the enemy is having a field day as a result?

Despair, fatalistic acceptance, go with the flow? Habakkuk’s response was to get above the distress to a higher place of prayer. Up in a metaphorical or literal watchtower, he could look beyond current circumstances to a time when the situation would be resolved in the same way that city watchmen would be posted to see what was approaching, be it enemy or friend.

He simply had to hear from God

*2:1 I will climb up to my watchtower and stand at my guard post.
There I will wait to see what the LORD says and how he will answer my complaint.*

As he watched and waited, the answer came in a prophetic word showing how God will eventually deal with their enemies

2:2-3 Then the LORD said to me, “Write my answer plainly on tablets, so that a runner can carry the correct message to others. This vision is for a future time. It describes the end, and it will be fulfilled. If it seems slow in coming, wait patiently, for it will surely take place. It will not be delayed.

And in the meantime, God showed him how he should live, in one the most famous quotes in the bible and repeated 3 times in the New Testament.

2:4 Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked. But the righteous will live by their faithfulness to God.

The prayer for revival

In the context of the prophetic word he had received Habakkuk sings a prayer for revival

*3:1-2 This prayer was sung by the prophet Habakkuk.
I have heard all about you, LORD. I am filled with awe by your amazing works. In this time of our deep need, revive us again as you did in years gone by. And in your anger, remember your mercy*

Even though the word he had received caused him deep distress

3:16 I trembled inside when I heard this; my lips quivered with fear. My legs gave way beneath me, and I shook in terror. I will wait quietly for the coming day when disaster will strike the people who invade us.

At this point, Habakkuk could have been given to fear and anxiety but instead chooses to worship
3:17-19 Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign LORD is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights.

So what is God's word for us today?

Should we too expect a terrifying word of judgment? One thing I am sure of is that we have a wonderful example in Habakkuk of how to intercede for revival in any age.

Pray persistently, identify with the failings of God's people, yet learn to live a life of faithfulness to God, find a higher place where we can hear God's word, pray into that word and even if it causes us deep distress, begin to worship the God who is always good and always faithful. But there is a difference between the days of Habakkuk and now. However, it may seem like we are living in Old Testament times today, we are under a new agreement with God brought about by Jesus on the cross.

Prepare again for a shock

In the book of Acts we find Paul quoting Habakkuk in the Turkish city of Antioch of Pisidia as he brought the gospel to the Jews and Gentiles living there.

Acts 13:38-41 Brothers, listen! We are here to proclaim that through this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. Everyone who believes in him is declared right with God—something the law of Moses could never do. Be careful! Don't let the prophets' words apply to you. For they said, 'Look, you mockers, be amazed and die! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn't believe even if someone told you about it.'

Paul is bringing the amazing and almost unbelievable news that even though the people of God have sunk to an even lower level than ever before in their attempt to destroy the Messiah, the very son of God, something wonderful had taken place. Instead of evil destroying life, life would destroy evil!

Through the cruel and violent death of Jesus on the cross there would be released in his resurrection, not a torrent of retribution, but an outpouring of love and forgiveness. As a result, godless Gentiles began pouring into the kingdom of God, overflowing with thankfulness that they could leave their lives of sin and futility.

This was judgment of an entirely different kind. Jesus had paid the price for sin on the cross and the law of sin and death had been replaced by the spirit of grace and life. For many of the religious of the day, this announcement was not only unbelievable but unacceptable. How could pagan people be allowed into God's Kingdom without being born into a life of law and commandment simply by confessing their sins and believing in Jesus.

When we are praying for revival today, we should have the same approach as Habakkuk. Persisting, identifying, watching, waiting, hearing, interceding and worshipping. Now, however, we stand on the ground of the finished work of Jesus who came to destroy the works of the evil one (1 John 3:8) with the hope of forgiveness and new life for all.

Hab 2:14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

