

# Habakkuk 1:12-17

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*Habakkuk complains to the LORD again. He asks the LORD why He will use the Chaldeans to punish Judah, when they are even more wicked than the people of Judah.*

At first, Habakkuk asked God why He seemed to be showing indifference to the wickedness of Judah. He asked God why He was so silent and distant (vv. 2–4). The LORD told the prophet to look beyond the situation of Judah to see what He was about to do on an international level. God told Habakkuk that He would use the Chaldeans (Babylonians)—a ferocious and arrogant people—as His instrument to punish the people of Judah (vv. 5–11).

The LORD’s answer to Habakkuk’s initial question led Habakkuk to ask a second question. The rest of Chapter 1 is Habakkuk’s second question, which is, essentially “How is it just to have a nation even more wicked than Judah be the agent of justice?” Chapter 2 will begin with Habakkuk acknowledging that as a human he is very bold to be asking such a question, and he fully acknowledges that God might rightly chastise him for even asking. But Habakkuk wants to know, so he has the courage to ask. As we will see, God will be patient and answer.

The prophet prefaces his second question with an acknowledgment that God’s pending judgment of Judah’s wickedness is right and true. He acknowledges God’s righteousness by asking a rhetorical question that anticipates a positive answer: *Are You not from everlasting, O LORD?* Habakkuk addressed God using His covenant name Yahweh or “*LORD*.” It is the name that God disclosed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14, 15). This name means “The Existent One” and declares God to be unchangeable, eternal, and self-existent (Deuteronomy 32:4, 40; Psalm 90:2; 102:27; Malachi 3:6).

The Hebrew word translated as *everlasting* is “*qedem*” in Hebrew. Here it means “from of old” and refers to prehistoric times. It emphasizes the eternity of God, who existed before His creation (Genesis 1:1). Yet, with Him “there is no change” (Psalm 55:19). The *LORD* is *from everlasting*, and He shall “reign forever and ever” (Exodus 15:18).

In asking the rhetorical question “*Are you not from everlasting O Lord?*”, Habakkuk called Yahweh, *My God*. The term for *God* [“*Elohim*” in Hebrew] emphasizes the strength and power of the Creator, the one to whom “every knee will bow” (Isaiah 45:23). The prophet confessed that *the LORD* was his *God*. Indeed, *the LORD* was the Suzerain (or Ruler) of the people of Judah who were supposed to serve Him as vassals. God has now declared that He will judge Judah, and Habakkuk now acknowledges God’s sovereignty and His right to justice to Judah.

Habakkuk also called Yahweh “*My Holy One*.” The term *holy* means “set apart.” When it is used for human beings, it means that people (believers) are separated from sins and consecrated to God for His service. When the term is used for God, it means that He is separated from sins and consecrated to Himself because He has no higher authority above Him. He is the supreme ruler. He is sinless and perfect (Deuteronomy 32:4). He alone is worthy of praise. In this

acknowledgment, Habakkuk is approaching God in humility, recognizing that He is God, the LORD and supreme Suzerain (ruler) over Judah.

Because of the LORD's character, the prophet declared, *We will not die*. Since Habakkuk had just heard that Judah was going to be invaded by the vicious and swift Babylonians, it seems likely here that Habakkuk's reference to not dying reflects his comfort that Judah will be appropriately chastised and be spared from slumping into the abyss of paganism, and cease to be a holy and priestly nation, as it was appointed to be (Exodus 19:6). Perhaps also Habakkuk is indirectly petitioning the LORD to preserve Judah as His people. Deuteronomy 8 sets forth this warning to Israel (of which Judah was a part):

“It shall come about if you ever forget the LORD your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I testify against you today that you will surely perish. Like the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so you shall perish; because you would not listen to the voice of the LORD your God.”

(Deuteronomy 8:19-20).

The pronoun “we” in the phrase *we will not die* refers to the people of Judah. The prophet was confident that the people of Judah would not cease to exist because of the nature of their everlasting God. Therefore, although the unchangeable God will use the Babylonians as His tool to enact corrective measures upon His covenant people, according to the agreed upon terms of the covenant, He would not allow them to perish for His name's sake.

Furthermore, Habakkuk acknowledged God's judgement of Judah through the Babylonians (Chaldeans) saying, *You, O LORD, have appointed them* (the Babylonians) *to judge; and You, O Rock, have established them* (the Babylonians) *to correct* (Judah).

In the first line, the prophet used Yahweh, the covenant name of God, translated as *LORD*. In the second line, Habakkuk uses the term ‘*rock*’ metaphorically for Yahweh. The term *rock* is a metaphor describing God's changeless stability and reliability (Deuteronomy 32:4, 15). The unchangeable and *everlasting* God had *appointed* the Chaldeans to judge or correct Judah. Habakkuk has confidence that God will not destroy them. This is a consistent biblical theme: “For whom the LORD loves, He reproveth” (Proverbs 3:12; Hebrews 12:5-7).

Habakkuk continued to recite the attributes of God, prior to asking his second question. As we will see, it seems Habakkuk could be seen as speaking these things about God as preparation for his question, which will inquire how God's use of the Babylonians to judge Israel is consistent with God's character. Now he described God's purity in two similar statements: *Your eyes are too pure to approve evil and You cannot look on wickedness with favor*. This precedes Habakkuk's soon-to-be-asked question how God can *favor* the Chaldeans over Judah, given that their *wickedness* exceeds that of Judah.

The Hebrew verb translated as *approve* means to look at something. The *eyes* stand for the entire person. The prophet stated that the *LORD*'s character is so clean or *pure* that He cannot look upon evil. He repeated the same idea in the second line. Yes, the *LORD* cannot *look on wickedness* because He is holy.

Having made these introductory statements about God, Habakkuk now asks his second question: *Why do You look with favor on those who deal treacherously?* Habakkuk's first question was why God was not answering Habakkuk's petition to judge Judah for its rampant wickedness, violating their covenant agreement to live in neighborly love with one another, and instead living in exploitation and violence (Habakkuk 1:2-3). God answered that question by stating that He was going to use Babylon to chastise Judah (Habakkuk 1:6).

Now Habakkuk is asking how God can *look with favor* on the Babylonians, who *deal treacherously*, by allowing them to defeat and rampage Judah? How can it make sense that wickedness is overcome by something even more wicked? God will answer this question in Chapter 2, and make clear that Babylon will be judged as well. In fact, anyone who lives by pride will be judged (Habakkuk 2:4a). For those who are righteous are only those who live by their faith (Habakkuk 2:4b).

In the context, the immediate application would be for Israel, who was given God's word in His law as to what behavior would secure great blessing. If Israel believed God, and walked in faith (that God's word would truly lead to their greatest blessing) then that person would be righteous, because they would walk in God's ways. But those who have pride, and think they know best for themselves, those people will always end up in judgement. The Babylonians would be no different. It is just a matter of timing.

The prophet asked the same question another way: *Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?*

The *wicked* were the Chaldeans (Babylonians), those who did not fear the *LORD*. They performed evil deeds continually. On the other hand, even though Judah was unrighteous compared to the standard in God's law, they were still *more righteous* than the wicked Chaldeans. Habakkuk's dilemma arose with his awareness that *the LORD* was about to empower the Chaldeans, "that fierce and impetuous people" (Habakkuk 1:6), to *swallow up* Judah, a nation that was *more righteous* than Judah.

To *swallow up* something is to make it disappear so that it loses its own identity. In our context, it means "to destroy." The Chaldeans were about to destroy the nation of Judah. Many will be either killed or exiled from Judah to Babylon. But the paradox is that the Chaldeans were more *wicked* than the people of Judah. That is why Habakkuk wanted to know why such things could take place. He was troubled deeply. But he was still aware he was speaking to Yahweh God.

Habakkuk acknowledged God's right to do whatever He desires, as He is God. But Habakkuk also desires to know how all of this can fit together and be righteous. Since God is righteous, then all of this must fit together somehow. Habakkuk wants to know. Are humans like mice for God to play with, like some great cosmic kitten?

Habakkuk asks a follow-on question to his fundamental second question how God can use a more wicked nation to chastise a less wicked nation for its wickedness. He asks two follow-on questions, the first being, *Why have You made men like the fish of the sea?*

When God first created human beings, He commanded them to “rule over the fish of the sea” (Genesis 1:26; Psalm 8:6–8). Now the people of Judah were *like the fish of the sea* in that they had become defenseless and helpless before the Chaldean army. The Chaldean army will be like a fisherman sweeping up the fish in his net.

In the second follow-on question, Habakkuk asks why *the LORD* had *made men like creeping things without a ruler over them*? The term *creeping things* generally denotes insects or vermin. In our passage, it is used specifically for the small sea creatures (Psalm 104:25). Such *creeping things* have no laws to govern their actions. They are disorganized and defenseless since no one shepherds them. Habakkuk’s point seems to be that the people of Judah were about to live at the mercy of the ruthless Chaldeans, who would care no more for them than humans care for an ant or minnow.

Habakkuk continued with the fish analogy and declared, *The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook, drag them away with their net, and gather them together in their fishing net*. The term ‘*Chaldeans*’ here is not in the Hebrew text but is represented by the pronoun “he.” Since the pronoun represents the Chaldeans, the NASB substituted it accordingly to make the verse explicit to the reader.

The term translated as *hook* (“chākhā” in Hebrew) refers to a curved or bent device of bone or iron used in ancient times for catching fish (Isaiah 19:8). The term *net* (“hērem” in Hebrew) is a technical term of the fishing industry and means “dragnet.” It is usually cast by one person. The *fishing net* is (“mikmeret” in Hebrew) refers to a casting net (Isaiah 19:8). It requires several people to pull it in a semicircle through the water.

According to Habakkuk, the power of the Chaldeans had become so great (with the LORD’s approval) that they could catch the people of Judah and those of the other nations at will like fish, with *hooks, net, and fishing net*. They could gather people easily onto the shore with their fishing devices. Just as a fish is helpless once gathered into a net, so would Judah be before the Chaldeans.

As a result of their conquest, *they* (the Chaldeans) *rejoiced and were glad*. These two verbs appear together here to intensify the Chaldeans’ level of gladness (Psalm 32:11). They were filled with emotion and joy because they thought they could control the destiny of the people of Judah by treating them like *the fish of the sea*.

Worse yet, the Chaldeans did not acknowledge *the LORD* as the One orchestrating those events. Instead, they attributed their success to their nets. As Habakkuk declared, *They offer a sacrifice to their net and burn incense to their fishing net*. The verb translated as *offer a sacrifice* is “zābhach” in the Hebrew language. It normally refers to the slaughter of an animal. To *burn incense* is to let an offering go up in smoke in honor of God (Exodus 30:30–38).

In the Israelite religion, a *sacrifice* was an offering of thanksgiving which served to bring fellowship between God and the worshiper (Leviticus 7:16; 22:18-23). The book of 1 Kings describes the course of this ritual. The worshiper would take the animal, slay it, and boil its flesh. He would then give the meat to the people so that they might eat (1 Kings 19:21).

In our passage, the pagan Chaldeans did not worship a god. Rather they worshiped their *net* and *fishing net* as their gods *because through these things their catch is large, and their food is plentiful.*

These fishing implements are used metaphorically to represent the weapons of war that the Chaldeans intended to use to overcome the people of Judah. Therefore, the implication is that the object of worship of the Chaldeans was their own might. They owed no allegiance to a superior deity. They worshipped themselves, and their own capabilities. God will call this “pride” in Habakkuk 2:4.

That situation prompted the prophet Habakkuk to ask, *Will they therefore empty their net and continually slay nations without sparing?*

The expression *empty the net* continues the fish analogy. It portrays the Chaldeans as fishermen who take the fish caught out of their *net*, then continue fishing until they fill it again and again (vv. 14–16). The idea seems to be “Will their appetite for conquest ever be quenched?” Will God allow these wicked Chaldeans to overtake and rule the earth? After all, who can stop them?

The prophet wanted to know how long the Chaldeans could continue to destroy *nations without* showing any mercy to them. The action of the ruthless and ferocious Chaldeans seemed unending to the prophet. That explains why Habakkuk wanted to ask God when He would put a stop to the wicked Chaldeans.

In Chapter 2, God will make clear that it will be He who will place limits on Babylon. In fact, we will see in the book of Daniel that Babylon’s greatest king, Nebuchadnezzar, will humble himself before God. It will be an exiled Judaeon, Daniel, who will bring the truth of God into the court of Babylon.

### **Biblical Text**

<sup>12</sup> **Are You not from everlasting,  
O Lord, my God, my Holy One?  
We will not die.  
You, O Lord, have appointed them to judge;  
And You, O Rock, have established them to correct.**

<sup>13</sup> **Your eyes are too pure to approve evil,  
And You can not look on wickedness *with favor*.  
Why do You look with favor  
On those who deal treacherously?  
Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up  
Those more righteous than they?**

<sup>14</sup> **Why have You made men like the fish of the sea,  
Like creeping things without a ruler over them?**

<sup>15</sup> **The Chaldeans bring all of them up with a hook,  
Drag them away with their net,  
And gather them together in their fishing net.**

**Therefore they rejoice and are glad.**

**<sup>16</sup> Therefore they offer a sacrifice to their net**

**And burn incense to their fishing net;**

**Because through these things their catch is large,**

**And their food is plentiful.**

**<sup>17</sup> Will they therefore empty their net**

**And continually slay nations without sparing?**