

6 studies on Habakkuk

“Habakkuk prophesied to Judah from 630 – 597 BC approximately. Habakkuk saw the Lord deliver the death blow to the cruel Assyrians, but was then horrified to witness the rise of the even crueller Babylonians. He raised the tension between the relative sins of Judah and Babylon – Judah deserved judgement but Babylon was worse. He began to resolve this tension in his classic statement on faith in 2:4 (the apostle Paul’s proof-text for justification by faith) and finished his answer in the psalm of chapter 3 – an awesome vision of Yahweh’s triumph as divine Warrior and an affirmation of his care.” Taken from unpublished notes by Mark Strom which became part of his book Days are Coming 1992, reprinted as The Symphony of Scripture 2001.

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Notes

1. In preparing these studies I’ve mostly used the following sources: The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior and the Bible Brief on Habakkuk by Craig Dobbie from The Briefing magazine # 358/9. I’ve also included bits from Kerry Nagel’s Bible study booklet on Micah, 4th term 2008; Inside Out by Dr Larry Crabb and some unpublished notes by Mark Strom which became part of his book Days are Coming 1992, reprinted as The Symphony of Scripture 2001.

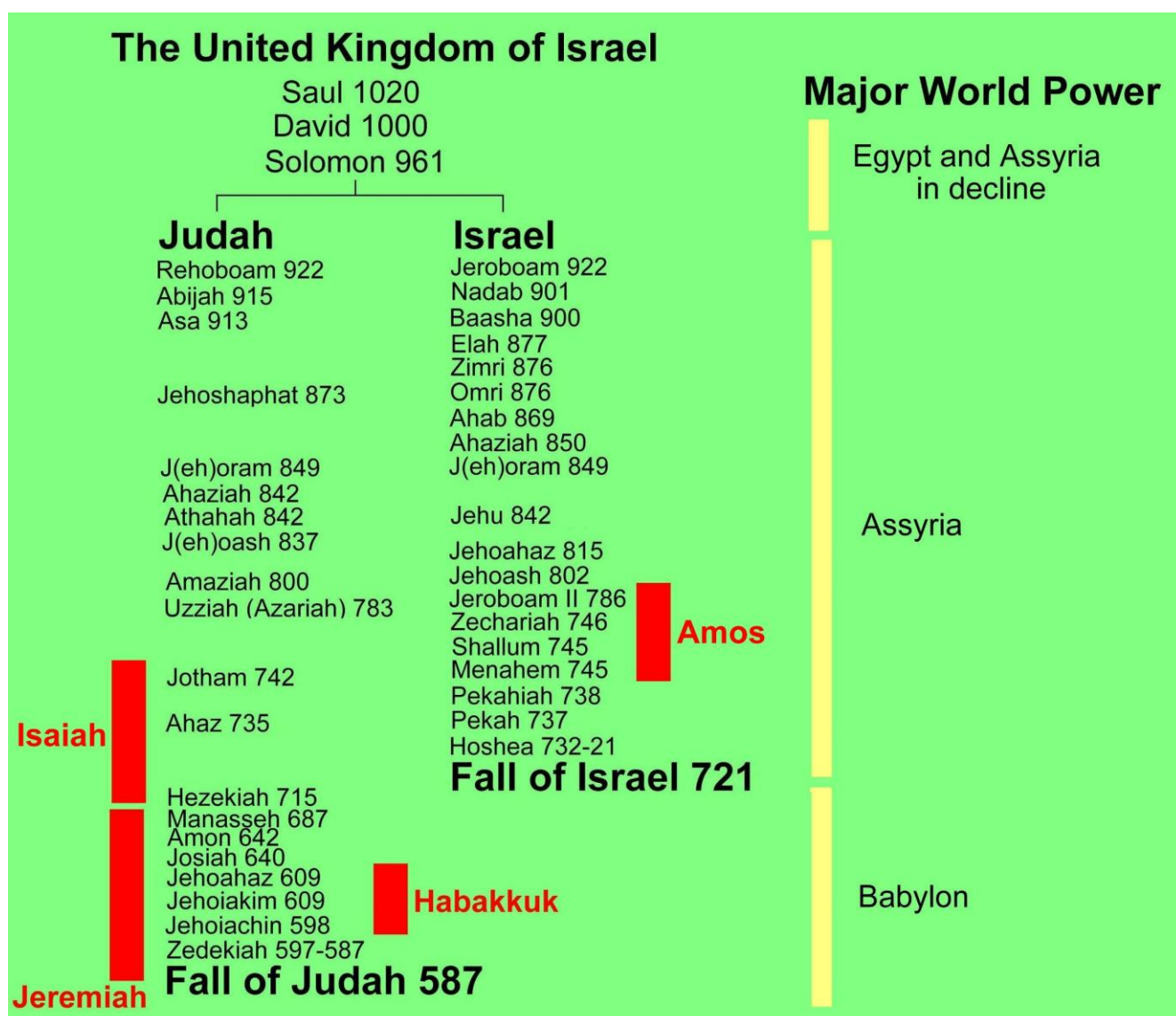
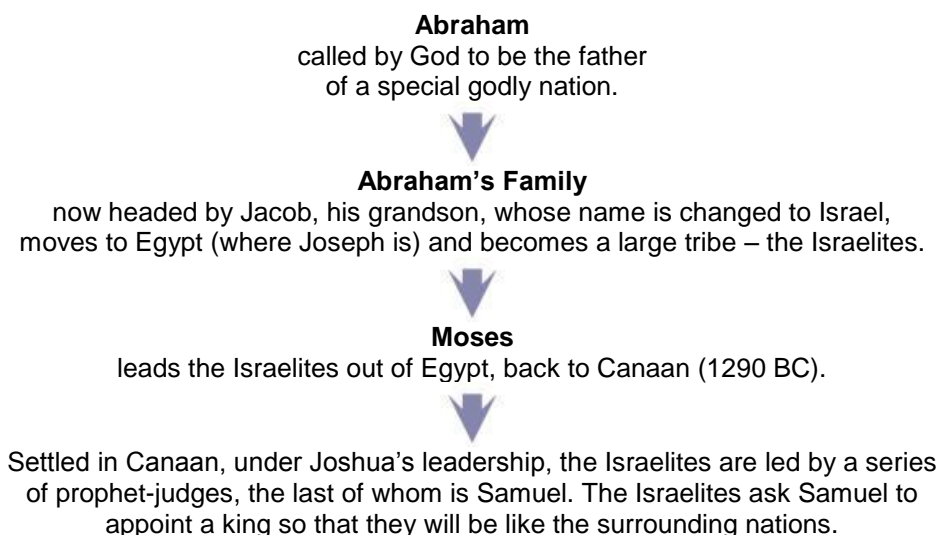
2. If groups use these studies they may find some studies too long for the time allocated. My suggestion is for individuals to do the whole study before you meet but if the group runs out of time then skip to the “To finish” questions for the last few minutes. Or if the group gets involved in a particularly interesting and relevant point then run with it rather than feel obliged to complete all the remaining questions.

3. Throughout the studies I’ve added paragraphs to fill in the extra detail that I thought would help people better understand the Biblical text.

4. I’m always trying to improve Bible studies so your comments, good or bad, and ideas about future studies may help produce better studies. Please write down any thoughts you have and send them to me at edwardeoconor@hotmail.com.

Ed O’Conor August 2009

Habakkuk: a brief background



“Habakkuk lived at a time when society was shaken by violence. As Judah and Jerusalem had sunk deeper into disobedience towards God and his requirements, so the fabric of national life had begun to come apart at the seams. The prophet lived and spoke in the inexorable build-up to the invasion of Judah and ultimate destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.” From The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior p 203.

1. Have you ever called on God for help? What did He say?

Read Hab 1:1-4.

2. What questions are being asked of God?
3. What is commendable about Habakkuk's example?
4. What do we learn about the people of Judah from Habakkuk's prayer?
5. (a) How is our situation today, like Habakkuk's?

(b) What is the solution?

“Most people . . . who have longed for the privilege of arguing with God, of questioning the way he does things, of seeking God’s explanation of his ways, have not been given that opportunity . . . What Habakkuk has recorded here is something extraordinary: a dialogue in which he twice complains to God about the world’s injustice, and twice God answers him.” From The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk by Donald E. Gowan p 20 quoted from The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior p 212.

Read Hab 1:5-11

6. Summarise God's reply to Habakkuk.

7. How are the Babylonians described?

8. Why are God's proposed actions so amazing and unbelievable (v5)?

9. If you were Habakkuk, what would be your response to God's answer to your original questions?

10. Read Amos 3:6 and James 1:13-14.

(a) What do these passages say about God's sovereignty over evil?

(b) Is God the author of evil?

11. What has all this got to do with Jesus?

To finish

12. The idea of God's judgement is much despised today. Why is this doctrine so important?

13. How would you answer a non-Christian friend who asked the question, "Does God care about the injustice in the world?"

1. Do you “rate” people as being better (or worse) than yourself?

If you do these things, why do you “rate” people?

If you don't do these things, how do you discern between people?

2. How does God “rate” people?

“Habakkuk was shaken to the core by God’s answer. . . The self-appointed god of the Chaldeans [Babylonians], people who were worshipping their own power and might, has appalled the sensitivities of this Hebrew prophet. And so he invokes God in a string of resonant phrases and titles, which together calm him down and allow him some breathing (and thinking) space, so that he can absorb the impact and implications of God’s reply.” From *The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk* by David Prior p 218.

Read Hab 1:12–13

(b) Why are these truths comforting?

4. What do you think is the significance of these words from v 12
 “O Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die.” ?
 (Cf. God’s covenant with Israel: Ex 6:2-8.)

5. (a) What does the use of the word “Rock” in v 12 remind you of (see Matt 7:24, 16:18, 1 Cor 10:4)?

(b) Which of these New Testament references (Matt 7:24, 16:18, 1 Cor 10:4) fit in with the use of “Rock” in Hab 1:12? Why?

Read Hab 1:13-2:1

6. How are the Babylonians described in vv 13 – 17?

7. What are Habakkuk’s questions in vv 13 - 17?

8. Why do you think Habakkuk is asking these things?

9. (a) Can you think of other things God has done when he’s used evil things or evil people for his purposes?

(b) What does this tell us about God?

(c) What does this tell us about our relationship with God?

To finish

10. What do you find challenging about Habakkuk, the person?

11. Look back over your answers to question 1. Has anything changed in your thinking about people who are better or worse than yourself? If so, how has your thinking changed?

Study 3, Hab 2:2-5, Trust me

Getting started

1. What things or events make you tense or confused?

2. How do you deal with the tension or confusion?

The story so far . . .

Habakkuk has asked God how he can allow the violence and injustice of the wicked to go unchecked. God's answer is that, unbelievably, he is sending the evil Babylonians as an instrument of judgement. Habakkuk then asks how a holy God can use people who are treacherous, wicked, inhumane and idolise their pitiless power of conquest; to execute his judgement?

Bible

Read Hab 2:2-5

3. Why do you think God wants Habakkuk to "write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets" (v2)?

4. What do we learn about the character of God from verses 2 and 3?

5. (a) Who are being spoken about in verses 4 and 5 (read also v8)?

- (b) Read ahead to Hab 2:20 and describe in a few words what is going to happen to them (we will look at this in more detail in the next study).

6. Looking at the phrase "the righteous will live by his faith" (v4):
(a) who, or what, is meant by "the righteous"?

(b) how does “the righteous will live by his faith” apply to Habakkuk’s situation?

7. Today, (a) how do we get righteousness (see Rom 3:21-26)?

(b) what does “the righteous will live by faith” (Rom 1:17) mean?

8. In Habakkuk’s day, how were people saved (see Gal 3:11, Ex 20:2)?

To finish

9. How does trusting in God help you deal with tension or confusion?

“The record of Habakkuk’s life begins with a bewildered prophet who soon becomes even more upset by confusion. He did not become silent (chapter 2) until he fully entered and expressed his confusion. God then revealed Himself to His servant in a way that led Habakkuk to proclaim a confidence in God that no confusion could shake. That’s the model. . . .

Facing confusion honestly gives strong faith the opportunity to develop. When life makes no sense, when moments of absolute confusion shred our soul, there are only three things we can do:

(1) We can abandon any claim to Christian belief and search for immediate relief and happiness (or, if that can’t be found, we can commit suicide).

(2) We can run from confusion as a woodsman would flee a hungry bear. A “Christian” strategy for ending confusion is to deny the reality of disturbing questions behind renewed commitment to the truth of God. Such a strategy produces rigid dogmatism, which saps our faith of its vitality. Legalism will not allow us to be troubled by exploring tough questions. Investigation is replaced entirely by indoctrination.

(3) In the face of confusion we may choose to cling with disciplined tenacity to Christ, to who He is and to what He taught, even as our struggle with confusion continues unabated.” From Inside Out by Dr Larry Crabb pp 105-106.

Getting started

- ## The story so far . . .

Bible

3. Who are the subjects of the “woes”?

The tone of these woes can be misinterpreted. It is a tone not so much of doom and denunciation as of deep sadness and lamentation. . . . But God himself does not gloat over the destruction of the arrogant and wicked. The evidence of both the Old and New Testament points to his inner agony at their refusal to listen and to repent. But because persistent corruption inevitably has its human victims, God's compassion leads him to both chastisement and condemnation of its perpetrators. The heart of God is broken both by the suffering of the violated and by the sinfulness of the violator." From The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior pp 243 - 244.

4. Who is taunting (v6) whom? Why are they being taunted?

5. What are the sins of the “tauntee”?

6. How will the tauntee's destruction take place?

7. How does all this fit in with the metaphor for debtors (v7)/extortion (v6)?

"Part of the shocking impact of this lies in its complete reversal of Chaldean thinking. They have all along regarded themselves as the ones in credit and their victims as the ones in debt. From the divine perspective, the opposite is true." From The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior p 246.

Read Hab 2:9-11 Second woe.

8. (a) What activity is condemned in these verses?

(b) What would be the modern equivalent?

9. What will be the consequences?

10. What does verse 11 imply about what will happen to secret sins?

Read Hab 2:12-14 Third woe.

11. What sins earn God's proclamation of woe here?

12. What would be the modern equivalent(s)?

13. From these verses, why is all the people's and nation's work for nothing?

14. (a) What things do we do that are all for nothing?

(b) Where do you find fulfilment?

15. What does Hab 2:14 point to (see Rev 21:22-23)?

Read Hab 2:15-17 Fourth woe.

16. In verses 15 and 16, what are the two different meanings concerning drinking from a cup (see also Jer 25:15-16)?

17. What punishment does God have in store for these people?

18. Why is the punishment appropriate, given the crimes?

19. What is the connection between Jesus and the cup (see Matt 26:36-44)?

“Lebanon, a distinctively luxuriant region allotted to the people of Israel by the Lord in his original mandate through Moses and Joshua, was particularly renowned for its magnificent cedars. These vast forests had been systematically plundered by the Babylonians. At the same time they had slaughtered large numbers of wild animals – all in the name of conquest and empire-building, or ‘progress’.

The cedars of Lebanon, evocatively called ‘the trees of the Lord’ by the psalmist [Ps 104:16], were a constant and ready target for rulers committed to grand, if not grandiose, building projects. These splendid palaces and temples became settings for banquets of unparalleled luxury, epitomized by Belshazzar’s feast on the night of Babylon’s capture by the Medes [Dan ch 5]. The wild animals (boar, bear, lion) became game for the hunter and food for the table.

Such *violence* directed at the created world will return to haunt its perpetrators: it will *overwhelm* (17) the Babylonians – a word which has the connotation of covering or smothering its victims.” From The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior pp 256 - 257.

Read Hab 2:18-20 Fifth woe.

20. What activities are condemned by God in these verses?

“The prophet here testifies to the double theme about idols which is frequently mentioned in both Old and New Testaments: an idol is empty, lifeless and useless; but it wields immense power in the lives of those who worship it [see Is 44:9-20, 1 Cor 8:4-6]. Habakkuk emphasises this strange double perspective in describing something made of wood, stone or metal as *a teacher of lies* (18). It cannot speak or respond to someone speaking to it: but it is an influential teacher, imparting lies rather than truth.” From The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior p 258.

21. What is ironic about v20?

22. The idea of a wooden idol covered with gold and silver (v19) has been compared to a Christmas tree. What is the spiritual connection?

23. Rather than referring to things like cars, surfboards or wealth as idols; who is it that non-Christians make their god? Why?

24. How is verse 20(a) an appropriate ending for the five woes?

(b) an appropriate ending to Habakkuk's questions in chapter 1?

"There is another kind of silence and that is when we willingly submit to God . . . And we submit to God when we bring not our own inventions and imaginations, but suffer ourselves to be taught by his word. We also submit to him, when we murmur not against his power or his judgments, when we humble ourselves under his powerful hand and do not fiercely resist him." Quoted in The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior p 261 from Commentaries 15 by John Calvin p 132.

To finish

25. What has all this got to do with Jesus (see Matt 25:31-32, Acts 10:42)?

Study 5, Hab 3:1–15, Habakkuk's prayer

Getting started

1. (a) Name 5 mighty acts of God?

(b) Why did you pick those 5?

The story so far . . .

Habakkuk has asked God how he can allow the violence and injustice of the wicked to go unchecked. God's answer is that, unbelievably, he is sending the evil Babylonians as an instrument of judgement. Habakkuk then asks how a holy God can use people who are treacherous, wicked, inhumane and idolise their pitiless power of conquest; to execute his judgement? God says that the Babylonians are also under judgement and only the righteous will live by faith. The judgement on Babylon is described in 5 woes.

Bible

Read Hab 3:1-2

2. How would you describe Habakkuk's attitude in these verses?

Read Hab 1:1-4

3. (a) How would you describe Habakkuk's attitude in these verses?

(b) Why the change in attitude compared to Hab 3:1-2?

"The introduction, content, mood and style of chapter 3 all indicate an immense sea-change in Habakkuk's approach to God and to the situation in which he finds himself. These words are expressed, not as an oracle (1:1), but as a *prayer*. The prophet has been silenced by the response of God to his agony of heart and mind. His response, having been hushed, is to turn back to God in prayer. . . .

'This prayer indicates that the prophet now has no further case to make. He has pleaded his cause, he has concluded his dialogue with the Almighty. Now he leads God's people to an acceptance of the just and merciful orderings which the Lord has revealed to him.'" Quoted in The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior p 262 from Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah by O. Palmer Robertson pp 214 - 215.

4. What is Habakkuk asking for in Hab 3:2?

5. Why is Habakkuk making this plea (see Hab 2:2-4)?

Read Hab 3:3-15

6. What Old Testament events does Habakkuk allude to in the following verses?

(a) vv 3 – 4 (see Deut 33:1-4)

(b) v 5 (see Ex 9:3, 32:35)

(c) vv 6 – 7 (see Ex 19:16-18)

(d) vv 8 – 10 (see Ex 14:21 ff)

(e) vv 11 – 15 (see Ps 77:16-19, Joshua 10:10-13)

7. What is Habakkuk praying for? Compare this answer with your answer to question 4.

“Habakkuk’s reinvigoration has occurred precisely because he is in communication with a God who is on the move. ‘The stunning revelation about this God is that he actually “comes”. [Quoted in The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior p 265 from Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah by O. Palmer Robertson p 222.] The emphasis is on the coming of God himself as the source of hope for the Lord’s people. We are accustomed to the twin truths of God’s transcendental otherness and God’s incarnational presence among and within us. But Habakkuk describes God coming to us, actually on the move on our behalf from point A to point B, *for the salvation of thy people, for the salvation of thy anointed* (13).” From The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior p 265.

To finish

8. Habakkuk recounts great “signs” and “wonders” (see question 6). What do you think was God’s greatest “sign” or “wonder”?

9. Considering Habakkuk’s prayer, what things should we pray for?

1. Think of a time when you had to wait for something. What was it and how did you feel?

Habakkuk has asked God how he can allow the violence and injustice of the wicked to go unchecked. God's answer is that, unbelievably, he is sending the evil Babylonians as an instrument of judgement. Habakkuk then asks how a holy God can use people who are treacherous, wicked, inhumane and idolise their pitiless power of conquest; to execute his judgement? God says that the Babylonians are also under judgement and only the righteous will live by faith. The judgement on Babylon is described in 5 woes. Habakkuk prays a prayer that is an example of the faithfulness (2:4) of the person who sees beyond life's calamities to trust in God and his ultimate justice.

2. (a) What are Habakkuk's emotions in the first part of v16?

(b) Why is he so emotional (see Hab 1:6, 12, 2:2)?

3. (a) What decision has Habakkuk made in the second half of v16?

(b) What attitude lies behind that decision?

4. What is Habakkuk's attitude in these verses?

5. How do you “rejoice” when things are going badly?

6. What has God done for Habakkuk as expressed in v19?

“One has to live in an agrarian world to begin to appreciate this appalling scenario. . . the ravages of war, the horrors of invasion, the devastation of nature’s resources, the removal of all basic necessities. . . There is no grain, oil or wine. There is no meat or wool. There is no food of any kind – fruit, vegetables, cereals, milk, meat. It is not simply a devastated economy. It is the end of everything that can keep body and soul together. There is nothing, absolutely nothing – and an invading army takes possession of the land, pillaging and raping with indiscriminate violence. . . Nothing to eat, nothing to drink, nothing to wear. Not just poverty, but the enemy stalking the land. Nowhere to hide. Those were the facts.

Having faced the facts, Habakkuk declares his decision: *yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation* (18).

It is one thing to thank and praise God for all good things in our lives, to rejoice in our blessings. It is quite another to rejoice in the midst of nothing, when all these blessings have been summarily and completely removed. The prophet has learned to rejoice, not in any particular quantity or quality of blessings, but in God himself. God never changes. If we learn – if we are liberated – to find our joy in the Lord, regardless of any good things we may or may not receive at his hand, then he remains a continuous source and cause of rejoicing. . . Such rejoicing, of course, can never be an academic exercise. It comes as the fruit of a personal relationship in which we ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’ (Ps 34:8), that true blessedness consists, not in receiving good things from his hand, but in a personal relationship of trust between an individual and his or her God: *I will joy in the God of my salvation*. He is *my* Saviour. He has saved me from the repercussions of my sin and disobedience. I belong to him and he belongs to me. We belong together. Nothing can tear us apart or keep us apart.” From The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior pp 275 -276.

7. What has Jesus done for us?

8. How does God give us strength (see 2 Cor 12:10)?

“The prophet is ready to let anyone know the reason for his hopefulness in a bleak situation. It is not due to any innate, inherited or inwardly developed strength of his own. There is no technique to master, no guru to consult, no formula to adopt: *God, the Lord, is my strength* [v19], no more, no less. He is clear that it is Yahweh, the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God of Israel, who is personally the one who provides all the strength he needs.” From The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk by David Prior p 277.

9. Is this a satisfactory ending to the book? Why/why not?

“The prophecies in the Book of Habakkuk came to pass when the Babylonians came and wreaked devastation in 597BC.” From the Bible Brief on Habakkuk, Reading 19 by Craig Dobbie from The Briefing magazine # 358/9

To finish

10. Looking back over Habakkuk and these studies how have things changed for the prophet?

11. Are you changing into a more godly person? What needs to happen for you to change?

12. What are you waiting for?