

Habakkuk

Opening Hymn: #145—Keep Me, Lord

Hab. 1:1 The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see.

“Burden” is an unexpected word at the start of this book. The RSV thinks “oracle” is a better rendering of the Hebrew. Strong says it means an utterance, chiefly a doom. In another place [Prov. 31:1; 31:1] the word is rendered “prophecy.”

But “burden” nicely conveys the prophet’s emotions concerning what he saw and what it all means for Israel. God has granted him a vision of coming judgment upon Israel followed by later punishment upon the heathen who are God’s agencies to execute that judgment. These collected utterances of Habakkuk are definitely a “doom.”

We know almost nothing about this prophet. We don’t know where he lived or for how long, who his parents were, nor can we be sure when he received his prophetic vision of the future. Because of the nature of the prophecy, most scholars place the time just before Nebuchadnezzar marched his armies to take Jerusalem and carry the Jews captive to Babylon. This would make Habakkuk a contemporary of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

Conditions in Israel at this time had reached the point where the people were no better than the heathen. They had forgotten all about the covenant and special relationship they had with God.

Chapter 1: Habakkuk’s Complaint

It is easy to understand Habakkuk’s distress. Listen to this:

Hab. 1:2-4 O Lord, how long shall I cry and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why doest thou shew me iniquity and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.

Habakkuk sees nothing but violence, iniquity, and injustice. The wicked oppress the righteous as they’ve done since the time of Cain and Abel. Many of God’s prophets have wondered about this. Job could not understand the ways of the Almighty; his comforters thought they could. They said his misfortunes were punishments from God. Jeremiah also questions this:

Jer. 12:1 Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Why are all they happy that deal very treacherously?

The psalmist says there was a time when he wanted the good things the wicked have:

Psa. 73:3 For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. [vs. 12]
Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.

The opening verses of Habakkuk show that he has been complaining repeatedly about “world” conditions: “Why don’t you do something, God?” God IS about to do something, and he tells Habakkuk all about it:

Hab. 1:6,7 For lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land to possess the dwelling-places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful [and from the margin] From them shall proceed the judgment of these...

The Chaldeans are Babylonians. At the beginning of the book of Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar brings his armies against Jerusalem and defeats it. This probably is the fulfillment of Hab. 1:6. Later when Nebuchadnezzar’s son Belshazzar is slain in Daniel 5:30, he is called “the king of the Chaldeans.”

So now Habakkuk has a vision of the future: The Babylonians will destroy everything. He acknowledges in vs. 12 that they are ordained for judgment and correction. But he is more confused than ever.

Hab. 1:13 Wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?

Although some of Israel were wicked, at least in Habakkuk’s eyes they are better than the heathen Babylonians. How can God give a victory to Israel’s enemy when that enemy is worse than Israel? God’s solution appears to create more problems than it solves.

Because he wants to know more, at the start of chapter 2 Habakkuk stands upon his watch to “see what God will say when I am reprov’d.” Another translation suggests the Hebrew should be rendered, “Get back because of my complaint.” But I rather like the King James. Habakkuk has dared to argue with God about God’s solution to his original complaint. He knows he deserves to be reprov’d for this, but he wants to hear the reasons behind what seems to be such a bad idea. And God does explain.

Chapter 2: Evil Will Not Really Triumph

Hab. 2:2,3 And the Lord answered me and said, Write the vision and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak and not lie; though it tarry, wait for it because it will surely come, it will not tarry.

What vision is the Lord talking about? What was it that Habakkuk was to write? The answer is the book itself, the “burden” that he SAW. This includes what God told him in chapter 1 and in chapter 2. Furthermore, he is told to write them on tables [Hebrew: clay tablets] and not on perishable parchments using ink. That’s one reason why his prophecy has survived.

There is a verse in chapter one that is quoted in Acts 13:41. Paul uses that verse to emphasize what was happening in their time. That verse contains a wonderful principle:

Hab. 1:5 I will work a work in your days which ye will not believe though it be told you.

If you don't want to believe something, you can just dismiss it. It is especially easy to not believe a prophecy if its fulfillment takes longer than you think it should. The doom pronounced by God through Habakkuk was definitely like that. Note how similar were the words of the prophet Daniel describing the time in which we are living today:

Dan. 8:17 At the time of the end shall be the vision. [vs. 19] And he said, Behold I will make thee know what shall be in the last end of the indignation: for at the time appointed the end shall be.

Habakkuk never doubted that God's judgment would come upon Israel, though many in Israel were not so sure. Still the prophet would like to know how God can show favor to a people who are worse than Israel. The question remains: Why does God permit evil? Answer: Although it appears evil is being tolerated, there is an eventual day of reckoning.

The remainder of chapter 2 contains five woes against the invader "whose soul is lifted up" [quotations from the RSV]:

1. [vs. 6] Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own.
2. [vs. 9] Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house.
3. [vs. 12] Woe to him who builds a town with blood and . . . iniquity.
4. [vs. 15] Woe to him who makes his neighbours drink of the cup of his wrath.
5. [vs. 19] Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, *Awake*, to a dumb stone, *Arise!*

Here's the answer Habakkuk needed. The Chaldeans, the most powerful empire the world had ever seen—pictured by the head of gold on Nebuchadnezzar's image—would be thoroughly humbled and punished in God's due time. Mighty Babylon, as Isaiah prophesied, would be completely destroyed:

Isa. 13:19, 20 And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation...

To this day, only wild beasts live in the ruins of Babylon.

Daniel's prophetic vision was for an appointed time, a time called the time of the end. We see many similarities between what we might call the "typical Babylon" of Habakkuk's prophecy and "antitypical Babylon" during the Gospel Age.

Rev. 17: 5,6 Babylon the Great the mother of harlots, and abominations of the earth. And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.

This “Babylon” is not the literal Babylon of Habakkuk’s day. That world empire had passed into the pages of history when Revelation was written. This “Babylon” represents another great power that oppresses God’s people. Once again the faithful may wonder: Why does God permit such evil? The answer is the same: He will not permit it indefinitely:

Rev. 18:2 Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen. [vs. 8] Therefore shall her plagues come in one day, death, and mourning, and famine: and she shall be utterly burned with fire: for strong is the Lord God who judgeth her. [vs. 21] Babylon shall be thrown down and shall be found no more at all.

When you think the forces of evil are winning . . . When you think the unjust live better than the just . . . When you think the full establishment of the kingdom is tarrying—remember the prophecy of Habakkuk. The destruction foretold by God did come upon Jerusalem, even though the people didn’t believe what they were told. The destruction God said would come upon Babylon, did come to pass. We are sure the destruction upon anti-typical Babylon will also occur, whether the prophecy seems to tarry or not.

But we have no pleasure in destruction. We know that present evil conditions must be destroyed before the blessings of the kingdom can flow to the people. Habakkuk talks about the blessings too:

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

The proud Chaldeans put their trust in military strength, “they sacrifice unto their net” says Hab. 1:16. A knight of old would take an oath upon his sword, a symbol of his strength. It is said, “Might makes right.” But “might” makes no such thing. It is an example of a “god” that has no breath at all. What a contrast with the true God:

Hab. 2:20 But the Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him.

The Just Shall Live By Faith

The 4th verse of chapter 2 is extremely important. It is one of only two verses in this book that is quoted in the New Testament. This particular verse provided proof to the Apostle Paul for a key doctrine: Justification by faith. The book of Romans has much to say about faith; the word appears 39 times in that book alone. After a few introductory words, Paul quotes his first scripture in:

Rom. 1:17 For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith; as it is written,
The just shall live by faith.

Is this true? Don't the UNJUST live as long as the JUST? From the viewpoint of this life, of course they do. But not from God's viewpoint.

Paul raises Habakkuk's words to a higher plane when he showed that the life enjoyed by a just man can only come through belief in and acceptance of Christ. In the preceding verse he says "The gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." This salvation is what constitutes "living" and it is available only to those with faith. In the next few verses he shows how God's wrath is upon those who have no faith.

The Jews thought they earned God's favor by what they did under the law (justification by works). Paul used this Habakkuk text again to prove them wrong:

Gal. 3:11,12 But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith...

Again Paul uses this Habakkuk text to prove his assertion about the importance of faith compared to works.

Chapter 3: A Psalm of Salvation

Chapters 1 and 2 of this book contain the "burden" or oracle God gave to Habakkuk. Chapter 3 is something different. It is a psalm beginning with a subscription, containing a body, and concluding with a superscription like a psalm of David. A psalm is a sacred song or poem and it appears this was meant to be sung. In fact the last words say "to the chief singer on my stringed instruments."

We are not going to dwell particularly on this psalm. Some have thought it was a later addition to the book, but I don't think so. When you consider Habakkuk's state of mind with his knowledge that the Chaldeans are going to come in and destroy everything, what, if anything, would you expect him to do? He composes a hymn to sing the praises of when God intervened with special salvation for Israel in the past. Since it is all in poetry, it is not easy to understand the specific references. Here are some examples:

1. [vs. 6] Drove asunder the nations (referring to when they took Canaan).
2. [vs. 10] The deep uttered his voice and lifted up his hands on high (referring to the walls of water when they passed through the Red Sea).
3. [vs. 11] The sun and moon stood still in their habitation (referring to the battle of Joshua at Gibeon).

The thrust of this psalm is summarized in vs. 13: "Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people." Habakkuk hopes God will not forget his people in the coming time of trouble. Although the wicked Chaldeans may be punished eventually, Habakkuk hopes God will SAVE His people. And we know that's exactly what He has done.

Habakkuk prays in vs. 16 that he might rest in the day of trouble, referring to the coming trouble upon Israel. Whether this means he wants to be mentally at rest or whether he is praying for a rest in death is not clear. In either case, it is the principle that is important: In the time of trouble our prayer should be that we might be at rest in the Lord.

The next verse may be simply a prediction of the destruction of all food supplies, but viewed as symbolic language, Habakkuk combines three symbols for Israel:

Hab. 3:17,18 Although the **fig tree** shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the **vine**: the labour of the **olive** shall fail . . . Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

Judges the 9th chapter is the only other place we find all three symbols together. The olive signifies Israel's **religious** privileges; the fig Israel's **political** privileges; and the vine Israel's **spiritual** privileges. We have examples of each in the New Testament.

Rom. 11:17 [Religious] If some of the branches be broken off and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree.

Matt. 21:19 [Political] And when he saw a fig tree in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig tree withered away.

John 15:4 [Spiritual] I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit.

Lessons For Our Own Time

If this book were only concerned with the coming destruction upon Israel and the eventual destruction of the Chaldeans, it probably would not have survived. Like all the books of our Bible, it contains lessons on many levels. You may have seen some of these lessons as we've gone along. Here are those that appeal to me:

1. *"I will work a work which ye will not believe, though it be told you."*

This is a timeless quotation. Israel should have believed what their prophet was telling them, but few did. Those born under the Jewish law in Paul's day could not believe God was widening his perspective to include Gentiles. Today? We preach the coming kingdom and the ending of this long night of sin and death. And most people say it is just too good to be true.

2. *God's way of dealing with a problem is probably not our way.*

How many times do you go to God with a solution to a problem instead of with the problem? Don't tell him you need better health to serve the brethren, or money to attend a convention, or a new car to take brethren to the meeting. These are all solutions. Who would have thought that God's solution to the

problems in the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society was to abandon it completely, an organization that had been so wonderfully used to preach the truth? I'm sure no-one suggested that solution to Him.

God was not angry with Habakkuk for being concerned. He will never be angry with us when we bring a problem to Him. But let us remember that His ways have always been higher than our ways.

3. The wicked prosper and it doesn't mean a thing.

We all know you can't judge a book by its cover . . . but we do it anyway. The fact that others may be engaged in sharp practices doesn't mean we can do the same. Even worldly agencies, other religious groups, or social or political organizations may appear to achieve great advantage for their members. It doesn't mean a thing.

We have a special relationship with God and our affections must be set on things above. Earthly prosperity is not part of our covenant of sacrifice. The wicked are not in covenant relationship with God. What happens to them in this present evil world should not be a concern of ours.

4. Why does God permit evil?

This is perhaps the hardest question Christians face. Habakkuk makes it clear that God has no intention of permitting it indefinitely. He permits evil only so long as it suits his purposes. He stopped the evil of Israel. He stopped the evil of the Chaldeans. And He will stop the evil being done today in the great time of trouble that will soon engulf the world.

Let us use this question and our answer often in our contact with others and share the comfort the truth has given us.

5. "Oh that I might rest in the day of trouble."

We have also been given a great vision of a coming great day of trouble. Do we believe it? Of course we do. That's why we're here and why we take every opportunity to witness to the world around us even though none may believe it. The troubles in the world should never affect our mental state or our faith. Like Habakkuk we should rest in the providences of God waiting for our deliverance from this earthly body.

The prophecies of Habakkuk when seen in this light have a contemporary sound to them. May the Lord grant each of us the strength to be faithful to the vision we have received and run with patience the race set before us.

Closing Hymn: #121 — The Lord Will Provide

[First given in San Diego, December, 1985. Published in The Dawn, January 1987]