

# HABAKKUK

## INTRODUCTION

The name Habakkuk means to embrace or pressed to the heart. Habakkuk took his nation to his heart, comforted it, and held it up, as one embraces and presses to his bosom a weeping child, calming and consoling it with good hope.

The writing of Habakkuk dates at 612-606 B.C. Assyria fell to Babylon in the year 612 B.C.

When Habakkuk spoke, Nebuchadnezzar was already pressing westward, but had not reached Jerusalem.

Habakkuk is unique among all the books of the Minor Prophets.

1. Other prophets plead with the people on behalf of God. Habakkuk pleads with God on behalf of the people.
2. We have no information at all about the life and career of Habakkuk.
3. The date of writing is based upon Habakkuk 1:6.

Assyria had fallen and Chaldea, that is, Babylon was then the primary world power. Since Assyria fell to Babylon in 612 B.C. and Babylon invaded Judah in 606 B.C., the book must be dated within this period.

Habakkuk prophesied on the eve of Nebuchadnezzar's invasion and was puzzled over why God would allow it.

1. How can God allow, or rather how long will God allow social evil and violence to go unchecked?
2. How can a just God use the warfare of wicked men to punish those apparently less wicked than the punisher?

These questions are being asked repeatedly today, and the church's failure to answer them has turned many, especially many of the young, to practical atheism.

As we approach the text, perhaps we should ask ourselves these questions in today's language.

1. How, if there is a Christian God, can He allow economic iniquity and social injustice? Why doesn't He put a stop to such things?
2. How, if there is a Christian God, can He allow war to punish and cripple and deprive "innocent" people?

God gave Habakkuk the answers for which men have long sought. The question is do we have the faith and the courage to accept God's answer?

There are some lessons we can learn from a study of Habakkuk.

1. God may tolerate wickedness for a season, but ultimately, it must reap it's just recompense of reward.
2. For the righteous his integrity and fidelity constitute elements of permanency. They cannot perish, they will endure forever. "Faithfulness" is the guarantee of permanence.
3. If the righteous will but be patient, they will survive the tyranny and arrogance of the tyrant. "Evil is self-destructive."

Our children need to know not only what they should believe but also are entitled to know why they should believe it.

#### Outline of the book of Habakkuk.

1. "Watch and See." (God's judgment upon Judah)  
Chapter 1:1-3
2. "Stand and See." (God's judgment upon the Chaldeans)  
Chapter 2:4-20
3. "Kneel and See." (Prayer for compassion in the midst of judgment)  
Chapter 3:1-19

Habakkuk opens with a cry to God because of the wickedness, injustice, and disregard for the Law.

Habakkuk asks God why sin is being tolerated in Judah; the reply comes that the Lord is raising up Babylon to punish His people.

This leads to a second question of how God could use people as ungodly as the Babylonians to punish Judah. The answer is given that Babylon will be punished in its turn.

The book ends with Habakkuk's prayer of confident faith in the Lord.

## **HOW CAN GOD ALLOW INJUSTICE TO GO UNPUNISHED?**

### **CHAPTER 1, Verse 1**

Translated "oracle" as often as "burden," the introductory noun of verse one is a technical term to describe prophecy. The prophet saw what he was but to write as a vision.

One must either accept the prophecy as God's written word or reject it as the hallucination of a madman. Since history has long since proven its accuracy, the former seems more likely.

### **THE FIRST QUESTION**

#### **Verses 2-4**

Habakkuk addresses God by the name, "Jehovah." His use of the name Jehovah seems to imply that God is neglecting a nation to whom He owes special concern. Habakkuk says, "How long," How long will God allow?

If God is God, and we are His people, how long can He allow us to suffer at the hands of unrighteous men or an unrighteous governmental system such as ruled Judah in the days of the prophet? Those who sought evil gain for themselves at the expense of their neighbors did not desist at Micah's warning of destruction.

Those who built the luxury of their metropolitan affluence upon the blood of the downtrodden had not repented at the preaching of the earlier prophets.

The drunkenness and excesses of the wealthy and the powerful had not diminished since the Shepherd of Tekoa expressed his shock and predicted God's punishment.

Habakkuk's question is simply, "Why doesn't God do something about the situation?" He addresses his question directly to God Himself. He accuses God of

not hearing when he prays. His prayers have lifted the specific sins of violence before God. In return he sees more and more of that about which he has prayed.

## **JEHOVAH'S ANSWER**

### **Verses 5-11, Verses 5-6**

Jehovah's answer is not what the prophet expected. The answer to such prayers seldom is! Rather than magically producing Utopia for the nation by miraculously wiping out the sin and injustice, God challenges Habakkuk to take a good look at the world situation, to consider the nations that lay beyond the border of Judah.

The answer to the prophet's question lies beyond his narrow horizons. Just as the question is larger than one man or a single nation, so is the answer. It is easy to overlook a very basic principle which is apparent again and again in Scripture. The principle is simply that God is the God of the whole world. He is not an absentee creator who has gone away and left us after having set certain forces and laws in operation.

Nor is He the local God of Judah alone. Centuries after Habakkuk, Paul will tell the wisest men of his day these words found in Acts 17:26. This Jehovah of Judah is the God of all nations. He is Lord, not just of a single nation, but of all human history.

Therefore, the answer to questions that plague all men are to be found in the larger arena of international and world activity rather than in the confines of local self-concerns. If we believed this, we would have missionaries in every corner of the globe.

So wide in scope and so universal in application is God's answer to injustice and social exploitation, that He tells the prophet, "I am working a work in your days, which you will not believe though it be told you for lo, I raise up the Chaldeans. . ."

It is this that Jehovah foretells in answer to Habakkuk's first question. The Chaldean dominated Neo-Babylonian Empire virtually began with the subjugation of Judah and ended when Cyrus, the Persian, in 539 B.C. overthrew the capital and decreed freedom for the Jews.

God had prepared the Chaldeans (whose empire Babylon was) to redress His grievances with His people. We shall see later how this came about in answer to Habakkuk's second question.

## **THEY ARE TERRIBLE AND DREADFUL**

### **Verse 7**

Here begins Jehovah's description to Habakkuk, of the empire He is raising up to punish Judah. Keeping the prophet's question in mind, we must agree with Jehovah's statement that He is working a work Habakkuk will not believe.

Modern man also refuses to believe a just God of love will do such things!

### **Verse 8**

The Chaldeans are described as irresistible in power and military methods. Wherever they went there was havoc. They were famous for swift cavalry.

Their bent for conquest would become the scourge of the earth. Kings and castles, to whom others looked for defense, were to them a laughing stock. They captured cities as easily as throwing up a mound of earth and advancing over it. Ominously, one of their chief characteristics was the taking of numberless slaves.

### **Verses 9-11**

Babylonian slavery is of particular interest to us, for it was into this that Nebuchadnezzar led Judah. Female slaves belonged to their masters completely and most of them bore many children for their masters.

All of a slave's belongings were his master's. He could himself be sold at any moment or pledged for a debt. He could be put to death if it seemed good business to his owner. A reward for his capture was set by law, should he try to escape. He was subject to military conscription and for forced labor on roads.

Most of the exquisite cities, especially Babylon, were erected by slave labor.

A slave might marry a free woman, and their children's freedom was guaranteed by law. He might be set up in business by his master, as indeed many of the Jews did, and liberated as a reward for faithful service.

The religion of Babylon was Baal worship. This despicable idolatry which earned for Babylon the name “Mother of Harlots,” finds its roots in the earliest history of the “land of Nimrod.” It flourished in the age of Babylon’s great lawyer, Hammurabi and spread like a cancer round the fertile crescent, to Asia Minor, Greece, and finally Rome.

It seeped into northern Europe, and after the fall of Rome, when the Roman Catholic religio-political monolith ruled over the European dark ages. The saints and idols and the lord to whom Europe prayed was not the covenant God of the Bible or His Son, but the reincarnation of Babylonian deities.

Such was the religion and such were the worshipers whom God raised up to punish His people for their failure to keep His covenant and for the social immorality which existed among them because they had turned to the same gods. Habakkuk’s first question is answered! Jehovah will not long tolerate the evils that repel the prophet. He will use one of the most wicked nations in history, the Chaldeans to punish them.

## **THE SECOND QUESTION**

**Verses 12-17**

**O JEHOVAH, MY GOD, MY HOLY ONE**

**Verse 12a**

God had warned Habakkuk he would not believe the answer to his question. (1:5) The prophet, upon hearing Jehovah’s description of the Chaldeans whom He is raising up to punish the sins of Judah, recoils in shocked horror and in credulity.

The first half of verse twelve is, to the prophet, a rhetorical question. It answers itself in the asking of it. Jehovah is from everlasting! He is the God of Israel’s prophets! He is Holy! Therefore, His people shall not die.

This is the clearest statement in all the Bible of the gross misconception the Jews had of their relationship to God. Their major premise, that is, the everlasting holy nature of God is correct, but their false conclusion, that is, that they, as a

people, could not, therefore die, was based on a minor premise of their own devising!

The first question asked by the prophet grew out of circumstances fostered by the failure of the people to understand that, “God is wholly spirit and without material form, that He is the sole ruler of this universe.” This failure allowed the Jews again and again to fall into the worship of Baal.

The second question posed by the prophet (v. 12) resulted from their failure to understand that God “is absolutely righteous and just in dealing with his children—not favoring Israel more than other people.” If their superiority over other people was not evidenced in their unfaithfulness or their moral corruption, they believed that God’s past dealings with their father’s proved it.

They were mistaken. The fundamental Jewish error is a misunderstanding, not only of the nature of God, but as well a misunderstanding of a doctrine which runs through both the Old and New Testaments. It is often called the “Doctrine of Election.”

This doctrine that God is calling out of every kindred and race of man a people for His own possession is inherent in the unfolding inspired interpretation of the work of God in history and makes up the bulk of the Old Testament Scripture. It is the entire burden of the Luke-Acts narrative and it comes in for a detailed analysis in the writings of Paul (especially Ephesians, Romans, and Galatians). The Jews “were made a heritage of God, having been foreordained according to the plan of Him who works all things according to the council of His will.” (Ephesians 1:11)

The plan of God, which is the mystery hidden in times past to be revealed in Christ through the church (Ephesians 3:1-16) never included the Jews or the nation of Israel simply for their own sakes or as an end in themselves.

God chooses whom He will, that is, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, etc. His choice is made not primarily from the standpoint of its advantage to the chosen. Nor is His choice, even in the Old Testament, limited only to the physical

descendants of Abraham. Paul illustrates this truth in Romans 9:14 by referring to Exodus 9:16. There God says to the Egyptian Pharaoh (who was anything but a Jew), “For this purpose did I raise thee up, that I might show in thee My power, and that My name might be established abroad in the earth.”

The perversion of the Biblical doctrine reaches its climax in those who commit themselves to a “dispensationalism” which makes the Jew per se the center of God’s concern, both in the Bible and the age to come.

Such people believe about the Jew exactly what the Jew came to believe about himself. This belief blinds men to the revealed purpose of God’s intervention in human history.

The point is, of course, that the elect or more accurately the “called of God,” whether individuals or nations, are never chosen for their own sakes merely, but that they are rather called to participate in God’s eternal plan to offer the blessings of Abraham to all mankind.

**O JEHOVAH. . . O ROCK. . .**

**Verse 12b**

Habakkuk does not doubt God for a moment. It is difficult for him to accept the idea that God should raise up such as the Chaldeans to judge His people.

The prophet immediately concedes; “Thou hast ordained him (the Chaldeans, particularly Nebuchadnezzar and thou hast established him for correction.”

We must not fail to recognize Habakkuk’s conviction that God’s people could not be wiped out, is related to his understanding, quite correctly, that God is Himself eternal. His error was in identifying that people with a race and a nation, and in objecting to God’s use of another nation and race to bring about His purposes.



The term “O Rock” applied to Jehovah is reminiscent of Deuteronomy 32:4. His use of it reflects Habakkuk’s conviction that God’s work is perfect. His ways are just, even though they are beyond the prophet’s own understanding.

## **THOU THAT ART OF PURER EYES**

### **Verse 13**

Habakkuk knows God to be a pure God who cannot tolerate the presence of evil in His sight. Whatever else the Word teaches about God, it certainly affirms this truth, from Eden to Calvary. How, then, the prophet asks, can God look on such sinfulness as is present among the Chaldeans? Why will He look on Babylon’s destruction of Judah and hold His peace? His bias shows through when he asserts that the Jews of his day are more righteous than the Babylonians.

Two fallacies should be recognized at this point.

1. Jehovah, in revealing his intention to raise the Chaldeans against Judah, did not say He would overlook Babylon’s evil.

Divinely recorded history proves He did, in fact, no such thing

2. The insistence that Judah is more righteous than the Babylonians raises a moot question.

They had been unfaithful to Jehovah when they were the only people on earth who had His written word. Their behavior had consequently become so corrupt that it was the very reason God chose to raise up a pagan people to smite them.

## **HE MAKES MEN AS WELL AS FISH**

### **Verses 14-15**

The prophet reinforces his argument by changing his emphasis from the holy nature of God to the unholy nature of the Chaldean’s treatment of people. He first says that the incursion of the Chaldeans causes confusion. Like a school of fish or

a swarm of insects, those struck by Babylon are left purposeless and leaderless. Then in the confusion, the Chaldeans capture slaves like catching fish with various nets and devices.

It was indeed the practice of Nebuchadnezzar to lead away to slavery those who were the leaders of a conquered people. The practice, according to Micah, was God's device to punish those whose leadership had corrupted the nation.

### **Verse 16**

Habakkuk adds that the success of the Chaldeans is the force of their own skill and power (rather than dependence upon God). They idolize themselves because of this. (Deuteronomy 6:17) To Habakkuk this is further evidence that Jehovah cannot use such a nation against his own people.

### **Verse 17**

Furthermore, asks the prophet, will there ever be an end to it, if God allows such a people as the Chaldeans to succeed against His chosen ones? This argument sounds extremely familiar to us today as we are asked to believe that God cannot control the evil forces of the middle-east, if these forces prevail against us. Perhaps we, as Habakkuk, need to give serious attention to God's answer.

## **JEHOVAH'S ANSWER**

### **CHAPTER 2:1-20**

#### **Verse 1**

Having presented what sounds to himself like a conclusive argument against God's use of the Chaldeans to punish Judah, Habakkuk now declares he will simply stand and wait Jehovah's answer.

We do not know what answer he expected. Perhaps he thought Jehovah would acquiesce, as He did when Moses interceded following the unfaithfulness of the people shortly after the exodus.

In any event, the answer was not long in coming. The prophet is to write the vision (which is how the book of Habakkuk came into being). He is to make it plain upon tables.

### **Verse 2**

National dealings were engraved upon wooden tables covered with wax. The engraving was made with a hot iron writing instrument and the plaque—or tablet thus engraved was hung in public in the temple. It is to be written so plainly that one running past could read it without stopping.

The idea seems to be that whoever reads the tablet engraved with God's answer to Habakkuk's complaint will run to whomever he can with the news. "Run" is used elsewhere for the urgent announcing of God's revealed truth.

In view of modern insistence upon the same complaints against God, it would seem that we too should adopt a sense of urgency. God's answer is still valid. Men need to know it now as in the day of the prophet.

### **Verse 3**

The message is to be committed to writing because the fulfillment of what is said lies in the future, from the point of view of those who first read it. "Write it down just as you receive it," says God, in effect, "then see if it doesn't happen just this way."

In this verse is stated a point which needs to be imprinted indelibly on the mind of anyone who ever doubted the divine inspiration of Scripture. What God said and the prophets wrote about the cataclysmic events of history was written well in advance of the events themselves.

That these predictions were fulfilled to the letter, years, sometimes centuries, later is conclusive proof to any honest scholar that they were not of human origin. A generation ago it was the fad among the critics of the Bible to say that the predictive prophecies of the Bible were actually written after the fact, but recent scholarship, even of the most liberal persuasion, tends to accept the

traditional dates of Scriptural writings. These dates place all predictive prophecies well before its fulfillment.

What God answers here, in reply to Habakkuk's second question, is a case in point.

Having answered the first question with a prediction of Judah's punishment at the hands of the Chaldeans, He answers the second by predicting the destruction of the Chaldeans themselves by the Persians.

The years of Babylonian captivity will make the fulfillment of this vision seem to tarry. Nevertheless, those who read are to wait for it. It will surely come. It will not delay.

#### **Verse 4**

Jehovah begins His answer by setting forth a general principle. Whoever is puffed up in his own soul (whether Jew or Chaldean) will be punished. The "righteous" (whether Jew or Chaldean) "shall live by faith."

The contrast of the Bible between the godly and the ungodly is set forth in verse four in bold relief. It is not a contrast between "good" and "bad" per se but between the haughty soul who sets his will against that of God on the one hand and the one who lives by faith on the other. (Galatians 5:16-18ff)

In contrast to the overwhelming military might in which the Chaldeans trusted and the Assyrian-Egyptian alliance upon which Judah had made her national security, the righteous shall stake his life upon his trust in God.

The Chaldeans would lay waste to Judah who trusted in Assyrian and Egyptian arms. Cyrus would one day bring the Chaldean empire of Babylon to her knees. Through it all, God would preserve His real people, the true Israel.

Here is an eternal truth, and one God's people in the closing decades of the twenty-first century would do well to learn. God deals with people on the basis of obedient faith not on the basis of misplaced national loyalty and military power, whether Chaldean, Jewish or American.

## Verse 5

There is an intriguing reference to wine here. The haughty, who depend on military might and alliances are pointed out as deceived by the treachery of it. When Babylon attacked Nineveh, the leaders of that city were indulging in a drunken revelry. When Babylon herself was taken, it was during Belshazzar's feast when he dared drink wine from the golden vessels of the temple of Jehovah.

The United States may one day fail in her own defense while our leaders are enjoying themselves in the endless round of Washington cocktail parties.

Of course, one who objects to such things in our day is looked upon as being somewhat strange and fanatic, as were the prophets who tried in vain to warn Israel and Judah of the consequences of the same thing. This verse begins a general description of those things characteristic of the Neo-Babylonian Empire which carried in them the seed of destruction that awaited her.

Cocktail party diplomacy was only one of those characteristics. The empire is presented as a haughty man. Just as Judah's pride went before her fall so would Babylon's pride contribute to the downfall of the Empire.

Every ancient nation shared this weakness of pride. Each imagined itself to be the select or chosen people of a god who was superior to all other gods. This national deity would preserve his people and subordinate all other peoples to them.

The Jews' flirtation with Baal, along with certain other influences, made them mistake Jehovah for such a nationalistic god.

This is why Habakkuk asked his second question. (Chapter 1:12f) Such haughtiness blinds any nation to the realities of international life.

The second characteristic of Babylon which contributed to his (the haughty man's) downfall was the inability to stay home. As Habakkuk pointed out (1:14ff), the Chaldeans swept all people into their sphere of dominance as a fisherman snares a school of fish.

Here Jehovah agrees with the prophet's evaluation. The haughty man "enlarges his desire as Sheol." Sheol is the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek Hades; the abode of the dead. It is never full but always seems eager to receive more and more people. Babylon is like this. Death is never satisfied, so Babylon is never satisfied, always seeking more victims.

Every world conqueror, from Alexander (or those who divided his kingdom following his untimely death) to Hitler has learned too late that he cannot encompass the earth and successfully control it.

The lust for power, as any other lust, carries in it the elements of its own death. It was indeed an attack upon Babylon by those who had once been her ally that brought the empire to destruction in the end.

### **Verse 6a**

Jehovah predicts that those whom the Chaldeans conquer will one day take up a parable (or taunt) against them. This taunt forms the first of a series of woes through which Jehovah answers Habakkuk's second question.

## **THE FIRST WOE**

### **Verses 6b-8**

As God's providential guidance of history will bring about Judah's chastisement at the hands of the Chaldeans, so it will bring about, in turn, the destruction of the Chaldeans. Just how this is to come about is described in the woes which Jehovah now pronounces against them.

The first woe is "to him that increases that which is not his." To see this principle in operation against the Babylonians, we must bear in mind that Judah was not the only nation to fall prey to the Chaldean's military expansionism. The Medes and Persians also came under the influence of the Babylonian greed. And the time was not long in coming when they would together find the strength to do something very final about it.

## **Verse 7**

This uprising reached its climax around 532 B.C. when Cyrus and his Persians in collusion with certain Babylonian clerics made Babylon subject to the enlightened domination of Persia. For two subsequent centuries Babylon was ruled by the Persians.

## **Verse 8**

God's prose to Habakkuk, in answer to the prophet's second question, is that this downfall of Babylon will be in punishment for her plundering and violence done not only to Judah but to other people as well.

## **THE SECOND WOE**

### **Verse 9-11**

#### **Verse 9**

The second series of woes emphasizes the covetousness of Babylon in her aggressions against other peoples. The covetousness is beyond the "normal" greed of an aggressor nation. It is so extreme as to be fatal not only to the invaded nations, but to the invader. Not content with national aggrandizement and the enriching of his own coffers, the ruler of Babylon steals enough from conquered peoples to enrich his whole nation or family.

The "nest on high" is figurative of the eagle. Here it refers to the royal citadel. Babylon was famous for its towered ziggurats.

#### **Verse 10**

To Babylon Jehovah says, "Thou hast sinned against thy soul." The empire raised up by God thus becomes guilty of her own destruction.

## **Verse 11**

The very towers of Babylon, built by the blood of conquered people and supported by stolen loot, will cry out against her. Her splendor is her downfall. Her glory is in her shame.

## **THE THIRD WOE**

### **Verse 12-14, Verse 12-13**

The third woe, pronounced in verses 12-14 is brought about by the extreme cruelty of Babylon. Like her covetousness, her mercilessness against conquered people also contains the fatal poison of the empire.

The blood-thirstiness of Babylon was infamous throughout the ancient world. Those who are now laboring to build Babylon are laboring for the fire. That is, they are simply erecting those things which will be burned in the destruction of the city.

The moral principles which bring about the rise and fall of people and nations in the flow of history are not accidental. Neither are they the product of any process of social evolution. These principles are fixed by God. They are the same from age to age in all of man's international relationships. The nation which fails to recognize them and govern itself accordingly may expect to join all previous empires on the rubble heap of dead civilizations!

### **Verse 14**

There is a purpose to God's rigid insistence that nations as well as men recognize and submit to His moral judgments. "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Jehovah."

A word about "glory" may be helpful here. The term itself means literally "the essential nature" of a person. God's glory is His essential character, that is, that which causes Him to be held in high repute among those who know Him. By dealing with men and nations on the basis of fixed moral laws, Jehovah is revealing



Himself to them. That nations are more often than not blind to this truth is to their detriment, not His!

Just as surely as God was preparing for the coming Christ by revealing Himself to Israel through the prophets and His written word, so He was preparing the nations for Christ through His dealings in history. That both Israel and the Gentile nations failed to learn what Jehovah taught simply underscores man's universal need for salvation. It certainly is not, as Habakkuk's questions would imply, and as modern agnostics insist, an indictment against God as unfair or unjust.

## **THE FOURTH WOE**

### **Verses 15-17**

The fourth woe, with which Jehovah answers the prophet's second question, has to do with the drunkenness of the Babylonians.

### **Verse 15**

Against the practice of excessive drinking in Babylon, God sets in figurative speech the downfall of the empire. Babylon is pictured here as a drunken man. He is not only drunken himself, but like most drunkards, he influences others to share in his reveling. The accusation is that the drinker shares in order to look on his neighbor's nakedness. There is no authentic friendship here. Babylon only pretends to share "the good life" so as to lure his neighbors into alliances which will ultimately expose them to loss and shame.

### **Verse 16**

Proud Babylon, the drunk, is himself not filled with glory as he supposes. His own nakedness is exposed and it is revealed to the world that he is uncircumcised. He is not God's covenant people! God will do to Babylon what Babylon has done to others. He will allow the empire to become so corrupt that "fool shame" (literally vomit) will cover its glory.

Ironically, Babylon's final collapse came in the midst of a drunken revel. The imagery here is very appropriate!

### **Verse 17**

In this verse the figure changes. From describing Babylon as a shameful drunk, Jehovah turns to describing him as a beast caught in a net trap.

"The violence done to Lebanon" reminds us that Lebanon was the gateway to Judah for the armies of Babylon. Also, that the temple destroyed by the Babylonians was built of the cedars of Lebanon.

Just as men threatened repeatedly by the incursion of wild beasts become driven by fear to destroy the bears, Babylon's neighbors, subjected to the brutalities of Babylon will one day be driven to destroy him.

## **THE FIFTH WOE**

### **Verse 18-20, Verse 18**

The fifth woe against Babylon is introduced by a question. "What," Jehovah asks, "is the profit of a graven image even to the one who makes it?" As with all nations of ancient time, Babylon created gods in their own image and then relied upon these gods of their own making to lead, empower, and preserve them. It is the futility of this practice God points to in this woe.

### **Verse 19**

Not only the covetousness and bloody violence of Babylon will contribute to the overthrow of the empire. The trust in man-made gods also will conspire to bring it about. The god in whom they trust is dead. "There is no breath in all the midst of it." They serve a dead god, they too shall die!

Note: "Christian America" woke one day a few years ago to hear on television and read in major publications that, "God is Dead!" Perhaps there was more to the pronouncement that we realized. The gods of Roman and Protestant institutionalism, the god of economic materialism, the god of permissiveness and

pleasure, the whole American pantheon is dead. Perhaps as we need to learn from the first four woes, so we need to learn from the fifth. The nation is doomed who worships a dead god!

### **Verse 20**

In contrast to the dead god of Babylon, Jehovah is in His holy temple. Strange words, since the temple would, when the vision of Habakkuk came to pass, be in ruins. The obvious intent is that God does indeed not dwell in temples made with hands, whether those hands be Jewish or Babylonian.

A brief listing of the five woes may be helpful:

1. (v. 6) Woe to him who increase his possession of that which is not his.
2. (v. 9) Woe to him who gets evil gain in order to set himself above others.
3. (v. 12) Woe to him who builds his great cities on the suffering of downtrodden people.
4. (v. 14) Woe to him who involves others in his sin in order to exploit them.
5. (v. 19) Woe to those who worship dead gods.

These woes reveal eternal truth which explains in varying degrees the downfall of every collapsed civilization.

## **THE PROPHET'S POETIC PRAYER**

## **VISION OF GOD IN JUDGEMENT**

### **CHAPTER 3:1-15**

Having been answered in no uncertain terms by God Himself, Habakkuk bows in prayer. There are no further questions, only the recognition of God's sovereign authority over nations, land and people, and a hymn of faith. The

prayer of recognition comprises verses 1-15 of chapter three. The Hymn of faith comprises the remainder of the book.

### **Verses 1-2**

Habakkuk owns the receipt of God's answer to his questions and the impressions made upon him by the answers. He confirms having heard Jehovah's speech.

In 2:1 he had set himself to see how God would answer his unanswerable logic. Now he knows. He is struck with the consternation by Jehovah's response. His concern now turns to Judah during the impending captivity. He is concerned lest they be utterly rooted out from being kept so long.

He prays that, as God has manifest Himself in this vision, so He will strengthen the people "in the midst of the years." The prophet prays earnestly that for the elect's sake these days of trouble may be shortened or the trouble of those days mitigated and the people supported and comforted.

Interestingly, this intercessory prayer is couched in terms of concern for "thine own work" rather than in the terms of national pride as was used in challenging God with the second question. (1:12ff)

Apparently, Habakkuk has become convinced that the people were for God's sake, rather than their own. Rather than praying for national or racial glory, he now entreats God to act for His own honor and praise.

Even those who are under God's wrath must not despair of His mercy. The prophet has learned the ultimate lesson. Men must trust God rather than instructing Him.

### **Verses 3-15**

It has been the usual practice of God's people, when in distress and ready to fall in despair, to help themselves by recollecting their experiences, and reviving them and pleading them with God in prayer, as He seems sometimes to plead with Himself.

So the prophet here looks back to God's first forming of His people, when He brought them miraculously out of Egypt into Canaan, which was the possessed by mighty nations. These words and wonders done in time past are magnificently described here to encourage greater faith on the part of the people during captivity.

### **Verses 3-4**

1. God appeared in His glory, as never before nor since.

The visible display on Mount Sinai is meant. Then "the Lord came down" in a cloud. He appeared as a devouring fire. His glory covered the heavens which glowed with the reflection of His appearance. "The earth was full of His praise" (or splendor) as people at a distance saw the cloud and fire on Mount Sinai and marveled at Israel's God. His brightness outshined the sun. Even Moses' face glowed when he came down from the Mount. The rays shone not directly from the face of God but around the side of His Hand as He hid His face. There was a hiding of His power.

### **Verse 5**

2. The prophet's prayer turns to the plagues by which God had delivered the people from Pharaoh.

The pestilence which slew the first born, the burning coals when the plague of hail mingled with fire, the diseases which blasted Egypt, these were at His feet, at His coming, at His command.

### **Verses 6-7**

3. He divided Canaan to His people Israel, and expelled the nations before them.

He exerted such power that the nations which stood in Israel's way crumbled and fell as the walls of Jericho. The mountain shook, even Sinai.

And “His ways are everlasting.” He has lost none of His terrible power. All the nations still rise and fall at His command. (Habakkuk has learned his lesson well.)

Jehovah’s covenants are unchangeable, despite outward appearances. His mercy endures forever. All the inhabitants of the neighboring nations are called to note the lesson the prophet has learned. Cushan and the Midianites especially need to take warning.

In the days of Othniel, God delivered Cushan into his hand. In the days of Gideon, a barley cake, in a dream, overthrew the tent of Midian. Habakkuk sees in these historic events the same principles Jehovah has set forth in the five woes.

#### **Verses 8-10**

4. He divided the Red Sea and the Jordan when they stood between Israel and God’s purpose in the people.

One might have thought God was displeased with the rivers and that His wrath was against the Red Sea, had one been unaware of God’s purpose in this activity.

As a general at the head of an army, so God rode at the head of Israel in His chariots of salvation. When they came to enter Canaan, the Jordan River which at that time of year overflows its banks, was divided. When the difficulties in the way of Israel’s salvation seem insuperable as an overflowing river, then God in His might breaks them as He divided the waters.

“The deep uttered his voice,” that is the Red Sea and the Jordan River were divided, the waters roared and made noise as though sensible to Jehovah’s restraint. “They lifted up their hands (or sides) on high for the waters stood upon a heap.” The Lord was mightier than they.

With the dividing of the Jordan River and the Red Sea, notice is again given to the “trembling of the mountain” as if the stopping of the waters gave a shock to the adjacent hills. The whole creation is yielded to God.

## **Verse 11**

5. He arrested the sun and the moon to bring about Israel's victories.

Attempts have been made by defenders of the Bible to explain this phenomena in scientific terms.

Some such attempts have smacked of dishonesty. We will do better to take God at His word in such matters. Once we have accepted the principle of direct divine intervention in human history, such "miracles" are no problem.

## **Verses 12-15**

6. He carried on and completed Israel's victories over the nations of Canaan.

This is largely insisted upon here as a proper plea with God to enforce the present petition, that He will restore them again to the land of which they were put in possession at the cost of so many lives and miracles. Many expressions are used here to describe the conquest of Canaan. God's bow was made naked, that is, drawn from its case. He marched through the land in indignation, as scorning to let he Canaanites any longer possess it.

He threshed through the nations, despising their confederacies. He wounded the head of the house of wicked men, that is, he destroyed the families of the Canaanites.

In giving Israel so many bloody victories, God fulfilled His promises to their fathers. The promises were made for the sake of the entire world (as we have seen).

## HYMN OF FAITH

### Verses 16-19

Within these few lines, we have the prophet in the highest degree of trembling and triumphing. In this world, God's people experience both. In heaven there is only triumph.

1. When we see a day of trouble approaching, it concerns us to lay up something in store for that day. The best way to so prepare is to tremble within ourselves at the Word of God.

Habakkuk's fear was that when the Chaldeans came to lead off the people, he will break them up as Assyria broke up the northern kingdom. Should his happen, God's people would be no more and God's covenant would go unfulfilled.

The fig tree in verse 17, would not flourish, the vine would bear no fruit, the flock would be cut off and no herd would be in the stalls. Apart from His covenant people, God's purpose would not be realized.

Of course, the truth of this concern is seen historically in that God did not allow it to happen. The captives of Babylon were not scattered. Their children returned to rebuild God's temple.

2. The prophet had looked back on the experiences of the people in former ages, and had recalled great things God had done for them.

From his trembling, he recovered himself. His fright gave way to faith and he was overwhelmed with holy joy. Despite the calamities he foresaw in the vision God granted him—he saw beyond it to the day of restoration.

It was the joy of faith. A century of suffering lay between the vision and the return of the remnant. Often centuries lay beyond before the coming of Him Who is the ultimate fulfillment of God's purpose in Israel.

Habakkuk closes on a note of optimism only possible to one who has finally learned to take God at His Word despite outward appearances.