

# The Prophecy of Habakkuk

*“The burden which  
Habakkuk the  
prophet did see.”*

*—Habakkuk 1:1*

## THE WORD “BURDEN” AT

the beginning of this book is somewhat unusual. Various translators have rendered the Hebrew word used here—*massa*—as “oracle,” “message,” “pronouncement,” and “word.” *Strong’s Concordance* gives the meaning as “an utterance, chiefly a doom.” In Proverbs 30:1, and 31:1, this Hebrew word is also translated “prophecy.” However, the thought conveyed by the word “burden” nicely expresses the prophet’s emotions concerning the vision. God granted him a preview of judgment to come upon Israel, followed by punishment upon the heathen who were to be used by God to execute that judgment. Certainly the collected utterances of Habakkuk can well be categorized as “doom,” and were most surely a burden to his heart and mind as he pondered their meaning.

We know almost nothing about the background of Habakkuk—where he lived, or for how long. We are not told 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, many Bible scholars place the time of its pronouncement shortly before Nebuchadnezzar marched with his armies to overthrow Jerusalem and take the Jews captive to Babylon. Conditions in Israel at that time had deteriorated to the point where the people were no better than the heathen nations surrounding them. They had forgotten about the special relationship they had with God and their covenant with him.

### **HABAKKUK'S COMPLAINT**

It is easy to understand Habakkuk's distress as we read his opening words. He prayed: "O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! . . . 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."—Hab. 1:2-4

Habakkuk saw violence, iniquity, and injustice go unpunished. He observed the wicked oppressing the righteous, and witnessed that the Law of God, which forbids such things, went unheeded. The opening verses of Habakkuk indicate that he had complained repeatedly about these conditions, and now wondered perhaps whether God had even heard his cry. God, however, was about to take steps to deal with the situation. He told Habakkuk, "Lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwellingplaces that are not

theirs. They are terrible and dreadful: their judgment and their dignity shall proceed of themselves.”—Hab. 1:6,7

From these prophetic words, Habakkuk knew what the future would hold for his people, for in them God had prophesied that the Chaldeans—or Babylonians—would destroy them as a nation. Indeed, the prophecy indicates that the Chaldeans were ordained for the very purpose of the judgment and correction of Israel. (vs. 12) Habakkuk was confused, however, as to why the Lord would use a nation so evil to accomplish this. He asked, “Wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?” (vs. 13) Although Israel was a wicked nation, at least in Habakkuk’s eyes they were better than the heathen Chaldeans. How could God give a victory to Israel’s enemy when that enemy was still worse than Israel? To the prophet, God’s method for bringing about discipline and correction to Israel seemed to create more problems than it solved.

Wanting to understand this perplexing situation, Habakkuk stood upon his watch to “see what he [God] will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reprov’d.” (Hab. 2:1) Habakkuk, rightly or wrongly, dared to question God about the solution to his original complaint. He knew he deserved to be reprov’d for this, but he wanted to hear God’s reasons for using the wicked heathen to punish Israel—it seemed in his eyes such an improbable and unreasonable method. Throughout the remainder of this prophecy, God did indeed explain further his plan of action, and the reasons for it.

## **EVIL WILL NOT REALLY TRIUMPH**

“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.” (vss. 2,3) What vision was God talking about, and what was it that Habakkuk was to write? The answer is the prophecy itself—the burden and message that he saw, and what God had told him. Furthermore, because of the importance God placed on this prophetic message, as well as its surety of fulfillment, Habakkuk was instructed to write it on tables—or clay tablets—and not on perishable parchments.

Earlier, in chapter one, God brings an important principle to our attention in his words through the prophet. He states, “I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you [in advance].” (vs. 5) The Apostle Paul quoted these words, as recorded in Acts 13:41, to similarly emphasize conditions in his day. The principle taught in these words is that it is easy for the fallen human nature to disbelieve any prophecy which pronounces trouble or punishment, especially if its fulfillment seems to tarry. The Lord’s word is sure, however, just as it was in the case of Habakkuk’s prophecy, and the doom pronounced upon Israel. God said that his Word would never “return unto [him] void.”—Isa. 55:11

Habakkuk never doubted that God’s judgments would come upon Israel, although many in Israel found it very convenient to doubt, and very difficult to conceive that God would ever punish his chosen

people by showing favor to a people who were far more wicked and unbelieving than Israel. The question raised then, still remains, as to why God permits evil to continue, whether it was the evil of the Israelites, the Chaldeans, or any other nation or individuals among mankind. The answer is that, although it appears that evil prevails unheeded, there indeed will eventually come a day of reckoning in all cases.

The remainder of chapter two predicted five woes against the invader, whose soul was “lifted up” against Israel. “Woe to him who increases what is not his.” “Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house.” “Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed.” “Woe to you who make your neighbors drink, Who mix in your venom even to make them drunk.” “Woe to him who says to a piece of wood, Awake, to a mute stone, Arise!”—vss. 6,9,12,15,19, *New American Standard Bible*

Here was the answer to Habakkuk’s puzzle. 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 eventually be completely destroyed. “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.” (Isa. 13:19,20) This prophecy was fulfilled so completely that even to this day only wild beasts live in the ruins of Babylon.

We see many similarities between literal Babylon of Habakkuk’s prophecy and symbolic Babylon of

the present Gospel Age. John the revelator spoke of what he observed in vision: "I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, . . . And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, 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." (Rev. 17:3,5,6) This prophecy of John does not refer to the literal Babylon of Habakkuk's day. That empire had already passed from the world scene long before Revelation was written. This Babylon represents another great power which has oppressed God's people, and once again the faithful may wonder, why does God permit such evil to prevail? Here again, however, we are assured from God's word of the time when "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen. . . . 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. . . . Babylon [shall] be thrown down, and shall be found no more at all."—Rev. 18:2,8,21

If sometimes we begin to think that the forces of evil are winning, or that the unjust live equally as well, or better, than the just, or that the establishment of Christ's kingdom is tarrying—let us remember the prophecy of Habakkuk. The destruction foretold by God did indeed come upon Jerusalem, despite the fact that the people did not believe this would ever happen. The destruction God had foretold would come upon literal Babylon also came to pass, exactly at the proper time.

Therefore we can be certain that the destruction of symbolic Babylon will also occur, whether or not

the prophecy seems to tarry. We have no pleasure in destruction, but we know present evil conditions must be destroyed before the blessings of the kingdom can flow to the people, and this is where our interest lies. This is the “vision” we long for—the establishment of Christ’s reign of righteousness and peace, which will bless all the families of the earth. Habakkuk, too, was concerned about God’s ultimate purpose of blessing mankind. He said, “The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”—Hab. 2:14

The proud Chaldeans put their trust in man’s might. “They sacrifice unto their net [their own strength].” By making “sacrifice unto their net,” it became a god to them—a god which had “no breath at all.” What a contrast to the only true and living God—a God who dwells in “his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him.” Truly, he has the power to silence all the earth, including the false gods of man’s making.—chap. 1:16; 2:19,20

## **THE JUST SHALL LIVE BY FAITH**

The fourth verse of chapter two is extremely important. “Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith.” This is one of only two verses in the book of Habakkuk which are quoted from 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 thirty-nine times in that book alone. After a few introductory words, Paul quoted from Old Testament scripture, saying, “Therein is the righteousness of God revealed

from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”—Rom. 1:17

In this present life, the unjust live just as long as the just. However, as far as God’s eternal purpose is concerned, this will not always be the case. In his quotation of Habakkuk’s words, Paul raised them to a higher plane by showing that the life enjoyed by a “just” man can only come through belief in and acceptance of Christ. In the preceding verse, he had stated, “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 only available to those who have faith. In the next few verses, Paul explains how the wrath of God is upon those who have no faith, and that without God’s favor no one can receive the blessing of everlasting life.

The Jews of Paul’s day believed it was necessary to earn God’s favor by keeping the Law—that is, justification by works. In his letter to the Galatians, Apostle Paul again used this same Habakkuk text to prove this premise wrong, and to show the importance of faith as compared with works: “That no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith.”—Gal. 3:11,12

## **HABAKKUK’S PSALM OF SALVATION**

We have seen that chapters one and two of this book contain the burden, or prophecy, which God gave to Habakkuk. Chapter three is in a different style. It is a psalm—beginning with a subscription, and concluding with a superscription, in the manner of David’s psalms.



Some Biblical scholars have thought this psalm was a later addition to the book, but that seems unlikely. When you consider Habakkuk's state of mind and his knowledge that the Chaldeans were destined to come into Israel, wreaking destruction upon the nation, we would expect him to act as he did. As a man of faith, he naturally turned his thoughts to God, and he composed a hymn of praise to the great Creator, remembering the many times past when he had intervened with special salvation for Israel. Since it is written in a poetic style, it is more difficult to understand the specific references, but many of these can be identified with thoughtful consideration.

In the sixth verse of chapter three, he speaks of the time when God "drove asunder the nations," referring to Israel's entrance into the land of Canaan. Again, salvation came about when "the deep uttered his voice, and lifted up his hands on high," referring to the walls of water Israel passed through in crossing the Red Sea. (vs. 10) A reference is made to the battle of Joshua at Gibeon, when "the sun and moon stood still in their habitation."—vs. 11

The thrust of this psalm is summarized in verse thirteen: "Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people." By recalling these marvelous examples of God's intervention on behalf of his people, Habakkuk's hopes were raised that God would once again remember Israel in their time of trouble. Although he believed God's Word that the Chaldeans would be punished, this did not prevent him from continuing to hope that God would save his people. Although this did not happen in Habakkuk's day, we are assured of Israel's ultimate salvation by

these words from the Apostle Paul: “All Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob”—Rom. 11:26

Habakkuk prayed that he might “rest in the day of trouble” which was soon to come upon Israel. (Hab. 3:16) Whether he meant he wanted to be at rest spiritually, or whether he prayed for rest in death, is not clear. No matter which is the case, the principle is what is important. In times of trouble, our prayers should be that we might rest in the Lord, knowing he has full control over every experience which comes to us.

## **LESSONS FOR OUR OWN TIME**

If this book were only concerned with the destruction upon Israel in Habakkuk’s day, and the destruction that came later upon the Chaldeans, God would not have directed Habakkuk to write it on permanent clay tablets so that it would be preserved for our use. All the books of our Bible contain lessons on many different levels. Let us consider a few thoughts from which we can profit today from the words of God’s holy prophet.

“I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you.” (Hab. 1:5) Israel should have believed the message given especially to them by God’s prophet, but few did. Those born under the Jewish Law in Paul’s day similarly 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. Yet, most people simply say it is too

good to believe. How true it is that faith is, and always has been, a scarce commodity.

God has his own methods of solving problems, and his way of dealing with them is probably not our way, since he has particular lessons in mind which the experience is designed to teach. God tells us, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways." (Isa. 55:9) At times we may go to God with a solution to a problem, and ask his blessing to be upon our solution, rather than properly going to him with the problem, and asking for his assistance and guidance in its resolution. We may tell him we need better health to serve others, or money to attend a convention, or a more reliable car to take brethren to a Bible study meeting. These are all our solutions. Let us make sure we follow God's solutions, not our own.

From the beginning of time, God has moved in what appears to be a mysterious way to accomplish his plans, and therefore we must seek to be in tune with him to understand how we can work with him. God was not angry with Habakkuk for being concerned about Israel. He will not be angry with us when we bring our problems to him. Let us remember, however, that his ways are higher than our ways, and are always best for our ultimate spiritual welfare.

Today, just as in Habakkuk's, many selfish, worldly minded people seem to prosper. We all know that it is not wise to "judge a book by its cover," yet we are still prone to do so anyway. Worldly agencies, religious groups, social and political organizations, all appear to achieve great

advantages for their members, but such appearances should not mean anything to us. Our affections must be set on things above. Earthly prosperity is not part of our covenant of sacrifice. Since the vast majority of mankind are not presently in covenant relationship with God, what happens to them in this present evil world should not be our concern.

Why does God permit evil? This is perhaps one of the hardest questions sincere Christians face. Habakkuk learned that God had no intention of permitting evil indefinitely, but only as long as it suited his purposes, and accomplished his designs. There came a time when he brought Israel's favor to an end because of their evil practices. The time later came when the Chaldean empire was totally destroyed from off the face of the earth. Likewise, God will indeed put an end to evil in this great Time of Trouble which presently engulfs the world. Let us use this penetrating question as an aid to giving a witness in our contact with others, and share the answers which the Truth has given us. These answers are found nowhere else except in God's Word.

Habakkuk prayed that he "might rest in the day of trouble." We also have been given a vision of the time of terrible trouble presently upon mankind. However, the troubles in the world are not to affect our faith. Like Habakkuk, we too should rest in the providences of God, waiting for his promised deliverance, and the silver lining to the present clouds of trouble, which will be made manifest soon in the establishment of Christ's kingdom of peace and righteousness.

The prophecy of Habakkuk, when viewed in this light, has contemporary importance. As we enter upon the new year of 2015, may the Heavenly Father grant each of us the strength to be faithful to the vision we have received, and run with patience the race set before us. The grand reality and climax of this vision “will surely come, it will not tarry.” ■