Appointed Times

"O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save."
—Habakkuk 1:2

THROUGHOUT ALL THE centuries of human misery the cry, "How long, O LORD, how long?" has gone up from the hearts of those who have loved righteousness and have been pained by the sin and suffering with which they were surrounded. It has seemed to most of these, as it did to Habakkuk, that the LORD did not hear them when they cried, or if he did hear, either he was indifferent to the evils which plague mankind, or was powerless to do anything about it.

The prophet's immediate concern was the sins of his people, which at that time were erupting into violence against one another. He asked the LORD, "Why dost 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." (Hab. 1:3) This prophet had been commissioned by God to serve Israel and to correct her wrongs, yet to him it seemed that all his efforts were to no avail. So it has seemed to the vast majority of those who, during the reign of sin

and death, have endeavored faithfully to serve the LORD.

As Habakkuk studied the situation with which he was surrounded in Israel, it appeared to worsen rather than to improve. He wrote, "The law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth." (vs. 4) Not only was sin rampant throughout the nation, but no serious attempt was being made to curb the wrongdoers. The unrighteous had control of law enforcement, 'therefore wrong judgment proceedeth.'

The LORD's answer to his prayer is interesting and revealing. We read, "Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you. For, 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."—vss. 5,6

The LORD explained to Habakkuk that he would use the Chaldeans to punish Israel. This 'bitter and hasty nation,' would be ruthless, and would take many prisoners. He said, "They shall come all for violence: their faces shall sup up as the east wind, and they shall gather the captivity as the sand."—vs. 9

From this, Habakkuk would know that the LORD intended to do something about the sins of his people; but still his ways were shrouded in mystery, so in prayer he sought further information. He said to the LORD, "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: 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

While the prophet lamented the sins of Israel he could not understand why the LORD would use those even more sinful as his instruments of retribution. At the conclusion of his petition for an understanding of the LORD's ways in this difficult situation, he said to himself, "I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he [the LORD] will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am argued with."—Hab. 2:1, *Marginal Translation*

The LORD did answer his prophet. He 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." (chap. 2:2,3) In this reply to Habakkuk, the LORD takes the subject out of the purely local setting with which Habakkuk was concerned, and places it in a setting which encompasses his entire purpose toward the sin-sick and dying race.

Habakkuk was concerned, and properly so, with the immediate difficulties which then confronted the nation of Israel. But the LORD is interested, and always has been, in the well-being of Israel and all mankind. His purpose in permitting evil, and his plan for destroying it, is concerned not with one nation alone, but with all nations, and it is for the understanding of this larger aspect of the permission of evil that God's people in every age have sought.

THE "APPOINTED TIME"

The LORD's answer to Habakkuk gave him little or no comfort with respect to his concern over the sins of Israel. However, if he grasped its import to any extent, he would realize that the LORD had not only this situation well in hand, but that eventually righteousness will triumph over evil throughout all the earth. The 'vision,' or understanding of the LORD's viewpoint with respect to evil, was for an 'appointed time,' that 'time' being 'at the end,' when the vision would 'speak and not lie.'

In Hebrews 10:35-38, Paul quotes from the LORD's statement to Habakkuk concerning the vision that would speak at the appointed time and would not tarry, and the apostle indicates that the fulfillment of it takes place at the time of Christ's second visit to earth. He quoted from Habakkuk to encourage the Hebrew brethren to be patient in their waiting on the LORD. They knew that the promised Messiah had come; that he had been crucified and raised from the dead. But he had gone away, and when would he return? Paul wanted them to be assured that it would be in God's appointed time, and that there would be no tarrying of the Divine plan.

CHRIST THE DELIVERER

God has made it plain in his Word that the deliverance of mankind from sin and death, and the destruction of all evil, is to be accomplished by Christ, the promised Messiah. The Old Testament prophets foretold his coming and work. However, not until he did come at his First Advent did the Lord's people understand that the Messiah was to visit the earth twice—the first time he was to die

as the Redeemer of the people; the second time to reign as king in a kingdom, or government, which was to be worldwide.—Isa. 9:6,7

There was an appointed time in the Divine plan for both of these visits. Concerning the death of the Savior we read, "In due time Christ died for the ungodly." (Rom. 5:6) Four thousand years of sin and suffering had passed before this great event in the Divine plan occurred, but it was exactly on time.

Nearly two thousand years have passed since, and throughout all that time only a small minority of earth's population have even heard of Jesus, and fewer still have gained a real understanding of the Divine plan of salvation which is centered in him. But this does not mean that God's plan has failed. It is simply that the 'due time' has not yet arrived for the world in general to be adequately informed concerning Jesus and the real import of his sacrificial death.

Writing to Timothy concerning an important aspect of the work of Christ during his Second Presence on earth, Paul said, "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time."—I Tim. 2:3-6

TIME OF FIRST ADVENT FORETOLD

It was with good authority that Paul wrote, 'In due time Christ died for the ungodly.' Through the Prophet Daniel the LORD had foretold this 'due time.' We quote, "After threescore and two weeks

shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself." (Dan. 9:26) The 'cutting off' mentioned here refers to Jesus' death, for which, it should be noted, this prophecy establishes the due time.

The understanding of this prophecy is not difficult, although it is essential to take into consideration the circumstances that form its background. It was given near the close of Israel's captivity in Babylon. The Prophet Daniel was one of the Hebrew captives, although, because of his ability and trustworthiness, he had been exalted to the position of Prime Minister, first under Nebuchadnezzar, and continuing until Cyrus of the Medo-Persian Empire.

Daniel did not allow his high position in a Gentile government to interfere with serving his own people, and being interested in their standing before God. In chapter nine, verse two, of Daniel's prophecy, we find him saying, "I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem." See Jeremiah 25:8-11 and II Chronicles 36:20-23.

From this, we learn that there was an appointed time for Israel's captivity in Babylon; namely, seventy years. When Daniel made reference to this, the conclusion of the foretold seventy years was approaching. In the preceding chapter, Daniel records a vision the LORD had given to him in which were portrayed events that seemed to Daniel to be the distant future. In this vision, it was revealed that one of the powerful kings he saw in this vision would "destroy the mighty and the holy people," and that he would stand up "against the Prince of princes."—Dan. 8:18-25

To climax this forecast of calamitous events, it was said to Daniel, "Shut thou up the vision; for it shall be for many days." (vs. 26) With this, Daniel "fainted, and was sick." (vs. 27) He apparently feared that the foretold seventy years of captivity might be continued, and wondered if the 'many days' of chapter eight, verse twenty-six, referred to a period of calamity beyond the seventy years.

Since Daniel had studied the prophecy of Jeremiah, it is not unlikely that he was acquainted with the lesson set forth in chapter eighteen, verses one to nine—the lesson taught to the prophet by observing the potter. Jeremiah wrote, "I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it."—vss. 3,4

We further read, "O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel." (vs. 6) Continuing, the LORD explains, "At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them."—vss. 7-10

Daniel might easily understand from this lesson that, although God had set a fixed time of seventy

years for Israel's captivity in Babylon, nevertheless their punishment was to be extended; for as Daniel well knew, the people had not learned the needed lesson, continuing to be disobedient to God and to his Law. So he went to the LORD in prayer, passionately asking him to extend mercy to his people.

This prayer is recorded in Daniel 9:3-19, and is eloquent in its appeal to God on behalf of his chosen people. Verse five reads, "We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments." Verses eight and nine read, "O Lord, to us belongeth confusion of face, to our kings, to our princes, and to our fathers, because we have sinned against thee. To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses, though we have rebelled against him."

Finally, "O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, hearken and do; defer not, for thine own sake, O my God: for thy city and thy people are called by thy name." (vs. 19) Thus did the faithful Daniel plead to God on behalf of his people, asking God not to 'defer' the time when they could return to their own land and to their own city, Jerusalem.

Daniel explains that, while he was thus praying on behalf of Israel, "The man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision [recorded in preceding chapter] at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, touched me about the time of the evening oblation." (vss. 20,21) Gabriel explained to Daniel that his prayer had been heard, and that he had been sent to give him "skill and understanding."—vs. 22 *(Continued on page 35)*

(Continued from page 31) Since Daniel was assured that his prayer had been heard, he would know that the foretold seventy years of captivity were not to be extended. Then, through Gabriel, the LORD gave his faithful servant another vision. As we noted in the case of Habakkuk, the LORD lifted his mind away from his immediate concern for a local situation in Israel and told him of a vision which would speak at the end, and would not tarry; so with Daniel, the vision he was now given superseded Israel's immediate experiences as captives in Babylon, and took his mind down through the centuries to the coming of the long-promised Messiah.

To Daniel, the coming of the Messiah was to be the solution of all Israel's problems as well as the problems of the whole world. Although Daniel saw the LORD's people persecuted and trodden down in the previous visions given to him, there was no real excuse for him to 'faint' and to be 'sick,' since God's promises pertaining to the Messiah and his triumphant kingdom were to be fulfilled.

"The kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdom under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people of the saints of the most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all dominions shall serve and obey him."—Dan. 7:27

We continue to pray that this wonderful promise from God's Word will soon come, and bring an end to earth's weary night of sin and death. ■

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

—II Timothy 3:16