

HABAKKUK

The Name and Background of Habakkuk:

The name Habakkuk means: "The cordially embraced one (favorite of God), or the cordial embracer." Luther writes about Habakkuk: "A man of heart, hearty toward another, taking him into his arms. This Habakkuk does in his prophecy; he comforts and lifts up his people, as one would do with a weeping child, bidding him be quiet, because, please God, it would yet be better with him." According to *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, "Some of the ancient rabbis, connecting the name with 2 Kings 4:16, 'Thou shalt embrace a son,' imagined that the prophet was the son of the Shunammite woman. The Septuagint form of the name, Hambakouk; Theodotion Hambakouk presupposes the Hebrew chabbaquq. A similar word occurs in Assyrian as the name of a garden plant."

The Date of the Writing of the Book:

Nothing is known about the prophet Habakkuk except his name. He appears in the book as a sensitive and courageous person. As the book Nahum, the Hebrew of this book is a literary masterpiece. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states about the style: "Only the Hebrew student can get an adequate idea of the literary excellence of the Book of Habakkuk. 'The literary power of Habakkuk,' says Driver, 'is considerable. Though his book is a brief one, it is full of force; his descriptions are graphic and powerful; thought and expression are alike poetic; he is still a master of the old classical style, terse, parallelistic, pregnant; there is no trace of the often prosaic diffusiveness which manifests itself in the writings of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. And if chapter 3 be his, he is, moreover, a lyric poet of high order; the grand imagery and the rhythmic flow of this ode will bear comparison with some of the finest productions of the Hebrew muse.'" Since Habakkuk announced the coming destruction of Judah, it had to be written some time before the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Most commentators date the book about 600 B.C. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* states: "Nebuchadnezzar advanced against Judah about 600 BC; but the years since the fall of Nineveh, in 607-606, and the battle of Carchemish, in 605-604, had given abundant opportunity to the Chaldaeans to reveal their true character, and to the prophet and his contemporaries to become acquainted with this cruel successor of Nineveh. On this theory, therefore, the prophetic activity of Habakkuk must be assigned to shortly before 600 BC. ... If Habakkuk prophesied about 600 BC, he lived under King Jehoiakim. The pious and well-meaning Josiah had been slain in an attempt to stop the advance of Egypt against Assyria. With his death the brief era of reform came to an end. After a reign of three months Jehoahaz was deposed by Pharaohnecoh, who placed Jehoiakim on the throne. The latter was selfish, tyrannical and godless. In a short time the deplorable conditions of Manasseh's reign returned. It was this situation that caused the prophet's first perplexity: 'O Yahweh, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear? I cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save' (Hab 1:2)."

The Fausset's Bible Dictionary states about the date of the prophet's writing: "He probably prophesied in the 12th or 13th year of Josiah (630 or 629 B.C.), for the words "in your days" (Hab 1:5) imply that the prophecy would come to pass in the lifetime of the persons addressed. In Jer 16:9 the same phrase comprises 20 years, in Ezek 12:25 six years. Zeph 1:7 is an imitation of Hab 2:20; now Zephaniah (Zeph 1:1) lived under Josiah, and prophesied (compare Zeph 3:5,15) after the restoration of Jehovah's worship, i.e. after the 12th year of Josiah's reign, about 624 B.C. So Habakkuk must have been before this. Jeremiah moreover began prophesying in Josiah's 13th year; now Jeremiah borrows from Habakkuk (compare Hab 2:13 with Jer 51:58); thus, it follows that 630 or 629 B.C. is Habakkuk's date of prophesying (Delitzsch)."

The Character of the Book:

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary observes: "The Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther was influenced by the Book of Habakkuk. Luther's discovery of the biblical doctrine that the just shall live by faith came from his study of the apostle Paul's beliefs in the Books of Romans and Galatians. But Paul's famous declaration, 'The just shall live by faith' (Rom 1:17), is a direct quotation from Hab 2:4. Thus, in this brief prophetic book, we find the seeds of the glorious gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Habakkuk begins his book with a cry of woe. Injustice is rampant, the righteous are surrounded by the wicked, the law is powerless, and God doesn't seem to care about the plight of His people (1:1-4). Habakkuk's prophecy is even introduced as a "burden" which the prophet saw (1:1). He wonders why God is allowing these things to happen. God's reply brings little comfort to the prophet. He explains that the armies of Babylon are moving throughout the ancient world on a campaign of death and destruction. At the time

when Habakkuk received this vision, the Babylonians had already defeated Assyria and Egypt. The implication is that Habakkuk's nation, Judah, will be the next to fall. The prophet was shocked at the news. He reminded God of His justice and holiness (1:12-13). How could He use the wicked Babylonians to destroy His Chosen People? Surely He realized the sins of His people were as nothing, when compared to the pagan Babylonians (1:13). 'Why do you...hold your tongue when the wicked devours one more righteous than he?' he asks (1:13). This direct question indicates Habakkuk's great faith. Only a person very close to God would dare question the purposes of the Almighty so boldly. God assures Habakkuk that the Babylonians will prevail not because they are righteous but because they are temporary instruments of judgment in His hands (2:4). Then he pronounces five burdens of woe against the Babylonians (2:6,9,12,15,19). God will not be mocked; the end of the Babylonians is as certain as the judgment they will bring on Judah. In all of this, God will vindicate His righteous character: 'For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea' (2:14). After this assurance, Habakkuk breaks out with the beautiful psalm of praise to God contained in chapter 3 of Habakkuk. This is one of the greatest testimonies of faith in the Bible." *The Pulpit Commentary* states about the character of this book: "There is something very striking in the style of Habakkuk. In grandeur and magnificence it is perhaps equaled by other of the prophets; language as pure, power as concentrated, may be found elsewhere; but the extended colloquy between God and the prophet, and the exquisitely beautiful ode which forms the conclusion of the prophecy, are unique. We know not whether most to admire the idea set forth, or the images under which it is developed. How terrible are the threatenings and announcements! how bitter the derision! how sweet and tender the promises of mercy and love! The past, the present, and the future are presented in vivid colors. Difficult, almost impossible, as it was for a prophet, confined to one circle of ideas, to be original, Habakkuk has given a new form to old conceptions, and brightened the notions or earlier seers with the splendor of imagery all his own, and with harmonious diction which is surpassed by no other sacred poet. The final ode may be set beside the two grand psalms, the eighteenth and the sixty-eighth, and will not suffer by the comparison."

Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary suggests the following

Outline of the Book:

I.	The Questions of Habakkuk	1:1--2:20
	A. The First Question	1:1-4
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The Text of the Book Habakkuk:

I.	The Questions of Habakkuk	1:1--2:20
A.	The First Question	1:1-4

1 The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.

2 How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?

3 Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds.

4 Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.

Habakkuk calls his prophecy an "oracle." Nahum, Zechariah, and Malachi use the same word for the prophecies they pronounce. The Hebrew word is *massa*, which literally means "a burden." The KJV renders it as such: "The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see." The same word is used in different

contexts, indicating a load carried by an animal. We read in Exodus: "If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it."¹ It also has the meaning of a responsibility as in: "Aaron and his sons are to go into the sanctuary and assign to each man his work and what he is to carry,"² and: "Kenaniah the head Levite was in charge of the singing; that was his responsibility because he was skillful at it."³ It has a non-physical meaning in Moses' complaint about his heavy responsibility as leader of the people of Israel: "But how can I bear your problems and your burdens and your disputes all by myself?" The use of the word seems particularly meaningful in the context of Habakkuk's prophecy. What Habakkuk had to say lay as a heavy burden on his heart.

Jeremiah devotes several verses to the varied meaning of the word, which is demonstrated most clearly in the KJV's rendering of the verses: "And when this people, or the prophet, or a priest, shall ask thee, saying, What is the burden of the LORD? thou shalt then say unto them, What burden? I will even forsake you, saith the LORD. And as for the prophet, and the priest, and the people, that shall say, The burden of the LORD, I will even punish that man and his house. Thus shall ye say every one to his neighbor, and every one to his brother, What hath the LORD answered? and, What hath the LORD spoken? And the burden of the LORD shall ye mention no more: for every man's word shall be his burden; for ye have perverted the words of the living God, of the LORD of hosts our God. Thus shalt thou say to the prophet, What hath the LORD answered thee? and, What hath the LORD spoken? But since ye say, The burden of the LORD; therefore thus saith the LORD; Because ye say this word, The burden of the LORD, and I have sent unto you, saying, Ye shall not say, The burden of the LORD; Therefore, behold, I, even I, will utterly forget you, and I will forsake you, and the city that I gave you and your fathers, and cast you out of my presence: And I will bring an everlasting reproach upon you, and a perpetual shame, which shall not be forgotten."⁴

B. God's First Reply

1:5-11

5 "Look at the nations and watch- and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.

6 I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own.

7 They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor.

8 Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops headlong; their horsemen come from afar. They fly like a vulture swooping to devour;

9 they all come bent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand.

10 They deride kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities; they build earthen ramps and capture them.

11 Then they sweep past like the wind and go on- guilty men, whose own strength is their god."

Habakkuk's first question is a very frank one. As was mentioned above, without an intimate fellowship with God, such words could never be spoken. The prophet reminds us of David's frankness in the psalms: "Hear my prayer, O LORD God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob."⁵ Habakkuk's question basically amounts to "why?" Habakkuk's eye in this is upon his own people, not upon the threat of a foreign nation. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: "The Hebrew is taken to imply that the prophet had long been complaining of the moral depravity of Judah, and calling for help against it. There is no reference here ... to acts of violence committed by the Chaldeans, who, in fact, are announced as coming to chastise the wickedness of the chosen people."

¹ Ex. 23:5

² Num. 4:19

³ I Chron 15:22

⁴ Jer. 23:33-40 (KJV)

⁵ Ps. 84:8

Habakkuk's cry amounts to someone's shout "Help!" or "Fire." It is a signal of utmost distress about the morally corrupt condition of the nation of Israel. The vividness of the cry in combination with the intimate relationship the prophet must have enjoyed with God present us with a very dramatic situation. This becomes the more gripping when we see in the continuation that God remains silent. Habakkuk finds himself in a position where the Father does seem to give His child a stone for bread.⁶ We can hardly overemphasize the intensity of this testing of the prophet's faith. A whole nation is going to hell and God does not seem to care. The scene Habakkuk is facing goes beyond the aches, pains, and death of individual suffering, it acquires cosmic proportions. It forces the question upon us: "Does God Care?"

Habakkuk's cry reveals the intensity of his reaction to the injustice that rules his country. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* believes that the prophecy refers to the reign of King Jehoiakim. We read: "Jehoiakim's reign was marked by injustice, treachery, and bloodshed (Jer 22:3,13-17). Therefore the Chaldeans should be sent to deal with him and his nobles according to their dealings with others." David's complaint centuries early is relevant here: "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"⁷

Habakkuk's position reminds us of similar circumstances when Martha and Mary called upon Jesus to come and heal their sick brother Lazarus. We read in John's Gospel: "Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So, when He heard that he was sick, He stayed two more days in the place where He was."⁸ Neither Habakkuk nor Lazarus' sisters understood that God's failure to respond was motivated by His love. This is even more difficult to discern in the case of Habakkuk. The prophet came to the same conclusion as Martha and Mary did; otherwise, he could never have concluded his prophecy with: "Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior."⁹

The prophet's initial approach is sound. He observes Israel's condition as a chosen people, the ones to whom God had entrusted the revelation of Himself in this world. He knew that they were meant to be a kingdom of priests, people who exemplified the character of God. What they had become was a gross caricature. His reaction to this is: "I don't want to see it." This is the paraphrase of his words: "Why do you make me look at injustice?" He is like people in modern times who do not want to look at television because there is too much suffering and disaster in the world. Evidently, God does not want him to put his head in the sand as an ostrich. The second part of his reaction is: "Why doesn't God do something about this?" Survivors of Nazi concentration camps have often asked the question. Since the demise of Hitler, there have been multiple situations in which the question has arisen. The list of horrors is too long to write down. How can sadism and atrocity stay alive in a world created by a loving God?

How do Christians react to similar situations? Corrie ten Boom and Elli Weiss both survived the horrors of a Nazi camp. Weiss was left a broken man whose God had died with his soul in the camp; Corrie came out a torch flaming with the Gospel message of God's love.

There is a pattern in the Bible of suffering under God's apparent silence, while hope remains the only focus, the light at the end of the tunnel. This pattern is nowhere more clearly exemplified than in the suffering of Jesus, "who for the joy set before him endured the cross."¹⁰ This hope is the hope of resurrection that keeps God's children persevering in the dark. Habakkuk had this hope, even though he was unable to verbalize it.

The prophet is correct in maintaining that Israel's condition is incongruent with the character of God. God had given His perfect law to the nation that guaranteed righteousness and justice. Now the law is paralyzed in Israel and justice has become impotent. After centuries of possessing the law, Israel had returned to the times of the Book of Judges when: "Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."¹¹ And what people "saw fit" was not good. The words: "The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is

⁶ See Matt.7:9

⁷ Ps. 11:3

⁸ John 11:5,6 (NKJV)

⁹ ch. 3:18

¹⁰ Heb. 12:2

¹¹ Judg. 21:25

perverted” indicate that there were still some righteous people left, but they were put under such pressure that their testimony had become ineffective. The perversion of justice means that a façade of justice was maintained; courts were convened and justices pronounced verdicts, but the content was hollow. People were executed for crimes they had not committed and criminals were promoted to higher offices. The world has not changed much since the times of Habakkuk.

God’s answer is even more disturbing than Habakkuk’s complaint. It sounds as if God’s remedy is worse than the illness. God announces the coming of the “Babylonians.” The Hebrew uses the word *Kasdiym*, which means “Chaldeans.” *The Pulpit Commentary* explains: “By this appellation the prophets signify the soldiers or inhabitants of Babylon, which won its independence and commenced its wonderfully rapid career of conquest after the fall of Nineveh, between B.C. 626 and 608. At that time when Habakkuk wrote the Chaldeans had not appeared in Judea, and no apprehension of danger from them was entertained.”

A sense of amazement is conveyed in the most compelling manner. It is almost as if God Himself is just as amazed about what is going to happen as the people. In the light of God’s omniscience and immutability, it is inconceivable to us that God could be amazed about anything, yet this is the feeling that is communicated to us here. It is as if God says to Himself: “How could I let this happen?” This thought corresponds to the human reaction to certain events in world history: “How could God let this happen?” We look for instance at the horror of what is commonly called “The Holocaust”; the question has as yet never been clearly answered. But then, the same question can be asked about the crucifixion. Jesus Himself has asked it! “About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’-which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”¹² The question is the answer! Our problem is that, in our inability to understand the character of the Eternal, we fail to see that our human emotions are a reflection of His emotions. God is more horrified about the Holocaust and the crucifixion than we can ever be. The same sentiment is evinced in the words: “The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, ‘I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth--men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air--for I am grieved that I have made them.’”¹³

Israel’s condition in Habakkuk’s days was so horrible that God was forced to take the most extreme measures of punishment. The most radical step God can ever take is to let evil have its own way. When God takes away the brakes, the vehicle races down the hill to its own destruction.

The Matthew Henry’s Commentary comments: “An amazing punishment, so strange and surprising, and so much out of the common road of Providence, that it shall not be paralleled among the heathen, shall be sorer and heavier than what God has usually inflicted upon the nations that know him not; nay, it shall not be credited even by those that had the prediction of it from God before it comes, or the report of it from those that were eye-witnesses of it when it comes: You will not believe it, though it be told you; it will be thought incredible that so many judgments should combine in one, and every circumstance so strangely concur to enforce and aggravate it, that so great and potent a nation should be so reduced and broken, and that God should deal so severely with a people that had been taken into the bond of the covenant and that he had done so much for. The punishment of God’s professing people cannot but be the astonishment of all about them.”

The apostle Paul put things for us in their right historical perspective when he quoted Habakkuk in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch. Comparing the Jews’ rejection of the Gospel to the moral corruption of Israel, he warned: “Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.”¹⁴ If events on earth can cause such consternation that even God recoils from them in heaven, how much greater horror should we feel about hell? Jesus reserved His sternest warnings about the fate of those who reject God’s love: “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and

¹² Matt. 27:46

¹³ Gen. 6:6-8

¹⁴ Acts 13:41

be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"¹⁵ We may not be able to understand this, but I firmly believe that God recoils in horror from hell. How much more should we!

Habakkuk describes the imperialistic character of the Babylonians in a vivid way. TLB adds color with the paraphrase: "the Chaldeans, a cruel and violent nation who will march across the world and conquer it. They are notorious for their cruelty. They do as they like, and no one can interfere." Habakkuk describes them as "a ruthless and impetuous people" who "are a law to themselves." Those of us who can remember World War II, especially in the European scene, can better understand this description, which is similar to Hitler's "Herrenvolk"¹⁶ that intended to conquer and subdue the earth.

The scene is only surpassed in the Bible by John's description of the demonic army that will sweep over this planet during the reign of the Antichrist. We read in Revelation: "The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it like the smoke from a gigantic furnace. The sun and sky were darkened by the smoke from the Abyss. And out of the smoke locusts came down upon the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not given power to kill them, but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes a man. During those days men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them. The locusts looked like horses prepared for battle. On their heads they wore something like crowns of gold, and their faces resembled human faces. Their hair was like women's hair, and their teeth were like lions' teeth. They had breastplates like breastplates of iron, and the sound of their wings was like the thundering of many horses and chariots rushing into battle. They had tails and stings like scorpions, and in their tails they had power to torment people for five months. They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon, and in Greek, Apollyon."¹⁷ In a sense, the invasion of the Babylonian army foreshadows the coming of the Great Tribulation.

The NIV renders vs. 7 interestingly: "They are a law to themselves and promote their own honor." The Hebrew reads literally: "Of themselves their judgment and dignity shall proceed." TLB states: "They do as they like, and no one can interfere." *Barnes' Notes* observes: "This is a character of antichrist (Dan 11:36; 2 Thess 2:4), a lawless insolence, a lifting up of himself." Man has no right to set his own laws. The rules of righteousness are derived from the character of God and the dignity of man consists in the fact that he is the bearer of God's image. When God is no longer the reference to man's moral behavior, wrong becomes right and shame become honorable. Babylon's mentality is expressed in the words of King Nebuchadnezzar who exclaimed: "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"¹⁸ God's judgment instantly stripped the king of his royal dignity and reduced him to the level of an animal. Actually, what Nebuchadnezzar became was less than an animal because animals still obey God's laws.

Habakkuk's prophecy about the Babylonian invasion conveys a sense of unbelievable speed. The horses are compared to leopards, which are known for their prodigious swiftness. Speaking about the same invasion, the prophet Jeremiah exclaims: "Look! He advances like the clouds, his chariots come like a whirlwind, his horses are swifter than eagles."¹⁹ The Septuagint renders "wolves at dusk" with: "Arabian wolves." The comparison with different animals and with the desert wind all emphasizes the pace with which the Babylonian military campaign unfolds. Their conquest was like a modern "Blitzkrieg."

The conqueror rejects all human conventions. "They deride kings and scoff at rulers." And no defense forms an obstacle to their conquest. The nations that are attacked are simply overrun.

The demonic connection between the Babylonians and the world of darkness is expressed in the words: "Then they sweep past like the wind and go on- guilty men, whose own strength is their god." TLB renders this verse: "They sweep past like wind and are gone, but their guilt is deep, for they claim their power

¹⁵ Mark 9:42-48

¹⁶ Literally "Nation of Lords," the superior race

¹⁷ Rev. 9:1-11

¹⁸ Dan. 4:30

¹⁹ Jer. 4:13

is from their gods.” The Hebrew is difficult to interpret and reads literally: “Then shall change his mind and he shall pass over, and offend, imputing this his power unto his god.” *Barnes’ Notes* comments on the text as it reads in the KJV: “[Then shall his mind change] or, better, ‘Then he sweeps by, *chaalap* ... is used of the overflowing of a river, Isa 8:8, of a wind chasing, Isa 21:1, of the invisible presence of God passing by, Job 9:11, or a spirit, Job 4:15, of the swift passing of our days, like ship or eagle, Job 10:26, of idols utterly passing away. Isa 2:18, of rain past and gone, Song 2:11. It is, together with *aabar*... used of transgressing God’s law, Isa 24:5. It is always intransitive, except as piercing the temples of man (Judg 5:26), or himself Job 20:24.” The image in this verse may refer to the flooding of the Euphrates River or to the sweeping desert wind that was typical of the homeland of the Babylonians. The army revealed the features of the land from which it originated.

We mentioned above that the words: “whose own strength is their god” establishes a link with the demonic. This remains true, although the immediate meaning is that the Babylonians deified their own strength. Satan will allow his subjects to imagine themselves on a level equal with the Almighty. Isaiah saw in the king of Babylon the image of Satan himself who said: “I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.”²⁰ And Ezekiel, similarly prophesied about the king of Tyre who said: “I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god in the heart of the seas.”²¹ Calvin called this: “Sacrilegious arrogance, in ascribing to his idol, Bel, the glory that belongs to God.”

C. The Second Question of Habakkuk

1:12--2:1

12 O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die. O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish.

13 Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

14 You have made men like fish in the sea, like sea creatures that have no ruler.

15 The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net, he gathers them up in his dragnet; and so he rejoices and is glad.

16 Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his dragnet, for by his net he lives in luxury and enjoys the choicest food.

17 Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy?

2:1 I will stand at my watch and station myself on the ramparts; I will look to see what he will say to me, and what answer I am to give to this complaint.

The idolatry and self-glorification of the Babylonians bring the prophet to a heartfelt cry to God to whom alone glory belongs. Habakkuk knows that the strength of the Babylonians is a lie. The king of Babylon is not a god and his strength does not make him divine. The king was, like all human beings, a man who is a bearer of the image of God. In him, however, the image has turned into a caricature. In order to flee the world of lies and shadows, Habakkuk turns to the reality of God Himself and cries: “O LORD, are you not from everlasting?”

This appeal to the Eternal suggests that the victory of Babylon is transitory. Babylon is the golden head of a statue with feet of clay.²² The whole Babylonian empire and all its stands for are not eternal. The apostle John reminds us: “The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” This is what Habakkuk expresses when he says: “O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die.” Although millions have died throughout the ages as a result of imperialistic tendencies of empires like Babylon, those who died in the Lord are still alive and will be forever. That is the comfort that forms the basis of Habakkuk’s profound message.

This does not mean that the prophet was not a prey of conflicting emotions. Time and eternity clash violently in his short message. He recognizes that Babylon is the instrument of God’s punishment for the nation of Israel, but that recognition does not answer all the questions about the problem of pain.

²⁰ Isa. 14:14

²¹ Ezek. 28:2

²² See Dan. 2:26-33

Habakkuk's question penetrates to the core of God's holiness. He does not ask God: "How can You do this to us?" but "How can You do this to Yourself?" The answer to this question is beyond human comprehension. How could we ever understand that God agonizes over human suffering? Yet, the Bible teaches that He does. In recording Herod's massacre of the infants of Bethlehem, Matthew quotes a prophecy that Jeremiah spoke centuries before the event, indicating the grieving of the Holy Spirit: "This is what the LORD says: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.'"²³ God's silence in Habakkuk's time foreshadows the silence of our Lord Jesus Christ in His suffering. Through most of His trial we read: "Jesus remained silent."²⁴ In the words of Isaiah: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."²⁵ If the excesses of sin we sometimes see with our sin-dimmed eyes make us recoil in horror, how much more will God's pure eyes hurt at the sight of human cruelty and baseness. When Jeremiah laments: "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people"²⁶; he reflects not merely on his own emotions but on the passion of God Himself.

The prophet depicts the Babylonian conquest as a fisherman depleting the waters of fish and worshipping his net in the process. The picture is drawn not from the viewpoint of an avid fisherman but from the perspective of the fish swimming around in panic and being driven into the net that will end their life. Not liking to fish myself, I can identify with the poor creatures. The Bible sometimes speaks about fishing in terms of blessing. The miraculous catch of fish in the Gospels pictures Jesus as the great fisherman, bringing a professional as Peter to his knees. Those who spread the Gospel are called "Fishers of men."²⁷ But Satan, not the Lord, is the great fisherman in Habakkuk's prophecy. That is what makes the picture so dark and full of horror.

Habakkuk sees himself as a watchman on the wall who relays the message that is brought in by runner about the state of the battle. The scene is like the one we read about in the rebellion of Absalom against David. David had to flee from Jerusalem and was awaiting word from the battlefield. We read: "While David was sitting between the inner and outer gates, the watchman went up to the roof of the gateway by the wall. As he looked out, he saw a man running alone. The watchman called out to the king and reported it. The king said, 'If he is alone, he must have good news.' And the man came closer and closer. Then the watchman saw another man running, and he called down to the gatekeeper, 'Look, another man running alone!' The king said, 'He must be bringing good news, too.' The watchman said, 'It seems to me that the first one runs like Ahimaaz son of Zadok.' 'He's a good man,' the king said. 'He comes with good news.' Then Ahimaaz called out to the king, 'All is well!' He bowed down before the king with his face to the ground and said, 'Praise be to the LORD your God! He has delivered up the men who lifted their hands against my lord the king.'"²⁸ In the age of instant communication in which we live such a scene has lost its meaning. But Isaiah tells us that God wants us to be like the watchmen of old. The Lord says: "I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest, and give him no rest till he establishes Jerusalem and makes her the praise of the earth."²⁹ We must be watchful in observing the things that happen in this world and in the expectation of the Lord's return. As in one of Isaiah's other prophecies: "'Watchman, what is left of the night? Watchman, what is left of the night?' The watchman replies, 'Morning is coming, but also the night.'"³⁰ God does not send us an e-mail and His revelations do not come to us via the web. The speed of God's communication

²³ See Matt. 2:18 and Jer. 31:15

²⁴ Matt. 26:63

²⁵ Isa. 53:7

²⁶ Jer. 9:1

²⁷ Matt. 4:19

²⁸ II Sam. 18:24-28

²⁹ Isa. 62:6,7

³⁰ Isa. 21:11,12

with us is the speed of a runner who may take hours or days to reach us with the divine message. It took Daniel's angel twenty-one days from the time he devoted himself to prayer to the day the message was delivered.³¹ God reveals Himself to those who "set [their] mind to gain understanding and to humble [themselves] before ... God." We owe these wonderful portions of Scripture to the patience and perseverance of men like Daniel and Habakkuk.

Habakkuk fully expects God to answer his question. Yet, God rarely answers us when we ask "why?" We will see at the end of Habakkuk's prophecy that the answer had not come. Better stated, God's answers go beyond our questions. God answered Habakkuk in a much deeper way than he could ever ask. Habakkuk had asked God: "How could You do this to me?" and then: "How could You do this to Yourself?" The question is the answer!

We have to look at God's answer given to Habakkuk in the light of the whole message of the Bible. The revelation that the prophet had to write down clearly on the tablet and that the runner had to broadcast turns out to be the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For the year 2000, the Christian and Missionary Alliance took the theme for its missions' conferences from Habakkuk's prophecy: "Run with the Message." Our Lord Jesus gave the widest scope possible to His disciples when He told them: "And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."³²

The Wycliffe Bible Commentary states: "These three verses contain what is perhaps the most difficult section of the prophecy, both from the standpoint of translation and from that of interpretation."

For centuries, scholars have debated the question whether Habakkuk literally climbed a tower or whether the prophet uses an image to depict a mental and spiritual attitude, similar to Jesus' admonition to those who pray to "go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen."³³ *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* comments: "The question is a disputed one, whether this command is to be understood literally or merely figuratively, 'simply denoting the great importance of the prophecy, and the consequent necessity for it to be made accessible to the whole nation' " The same *Commentary* continues: "Calvin brings out the first idea. [He] observes, that 'the watch-tower is the recesses of the mind, where we withdraw ourselves from the world;' and then adds by way of explanation, 'The prophet, under the name of the watchtower, implies that he extricates himself as it were from the thoughts of the flesh, because there would be no end or measure, if he wished to judge according to his own perception.' " *The Matthew Henry's Commentary* suggests: "The prophet's standing upon his tower, or high place, intimates his prudence, in making use of the helps and means he had within his reach to know the mind of God, and to be instructed concerning it. Those that expect to hear from God must withdraw from the world, and get above it, must raise their attention, fix their thought, study the scriptures, consult experiences and the experienced, continue instant in prayer, and thus set themselves upon the tower. His standing upon his watch intimates his patience, his constancy and resolution; he will wait the time, and weather the point, as a watchman does, but he will have an answer; he will know what God will say to him, not only for his own satisfaction, but to enable him as a prophet to give satisfaction to others, and answer their exceptions, when he is reproved or argued with. Herein the prophet is an example to us." It is noteworthy to observe that, up to this point, Habakkuk has spoken to God without receiving an answer to his complaints. It is when he withdraws and becomes silent that he hears God speaking to him.

D. God's Second Reply

2:2-20

2 Then the LORD replied: "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it.

3 For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.

4 "See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright- but the righteous will live by his faith-

5 indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples.

³¹ Dan. 10: 12,13

³² Matt. 24:14

³³ Matt. 6:6

6 "Will not all of them taunt him with ridicule and scorn, saying, "Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion! How long must this go on?"

7 Will not your debtors suddenly arise? Will they not wake up and make you tremble? Then you will become their victim.

8 Because you have plundered many nations, the peoples who are left will plunder you. For you have shed man's blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.

9 "Woe to him who builds his realm by unjust gain to set his nest on high, to escape the clutches of ruin!

10 You have plotted the ruin of many peoples, shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.

11 The stones of the wall will cry out, and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.

12 "Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and establishes a town by crime!

13 Has not the LORD Almighty determined that the people's labor is only fuel for the fire, that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?

14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.

15 "Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies.

16 You will be filled with shame instead of glory. Now it is your turn! Drink and be exposed! The cup from the LORD's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory.

17 The violence you have done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, and your destruction of animals will terrify you. For you have shed man's blood; you have destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them.

18 "Of what value is an idol, since a man has carved it? Or an image that teaches lies? For he who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak.

19 Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to lifeless stone, 'Wake up!' Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it.

20 But the LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him."

The message Habakkuk received had to be written down and relayed. God's answer shows a mixture of delay and urgency. On the one hand, it is made clear that the communication refers to future events, and on the other hand the word must be passed on urgently and immediately. *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* comments on this: "The words simply express the thought, that the prophecy is to be laid to heart by all the people on account of its great importance, and that not merely in the present, but in the future also. This no doubt involved the obligation on the part of the prophet to take care, by committing it to writing, that it did not fall into oblivion. The reason for the writing is given in v. 3. The prophecy is ..., for the appointed time; i.e., it relates to the period fixed by God for its realization, which was then still ... far off." Daniel was given a similar charge to write down his prophecy that pertained to future times and to keep it sealed. We read that the angel tells him: "But you, Daniel, close up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge."³⁴ John similarly had to keep his prophecy under seal. We read in Revelation: "And when the seven thunders spoke, I was about to write; but I heard a voice from heaven say, 'Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down.'"³⁵

It may be difficult to understand that God's message can be both pressing and yet that it pertains to a time that is still beyond the horizon. This seems to be the essence of the Lord's return; it is imminent and remote at the same time. Jesus expresses the tension in His advice to the disciples: "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come."³⁶ The key to the understanding of the paradox is in the word "watch."

"Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay." The word "linger" seems to be incompatible with "not delay." The KJV reads: "Though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry," using the same word for two different Hebrew words. The first is *mahahh*, which means "to question or hesitate," or "to be reluctant," and the second is *'achar*, meaning, "to procrastinate." The two words explain what we could call "the Lord's predicament." God is reluctant because of what the Day of

³⁴ Dan. 12:4

³⁵ Rev. 10:4

³⁶ Matt. 24:42

Judgment will bring, but He does not procrastinate. The apostle Peter explains “God’s predicament” by referring to God’s love and compassion in this respect. We read: “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”³⁷

It seems that the answer God gives goes well beyond the period in world history that caused Habakkuk to be so concerned. The king of Babylon becomes a type of the Antichrist who will appear at the end of world history, who in turn is representative of the archenemy, Satan himself. The words: “See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright,” have a wide application. They obviously do not refer to the righteous who is mentioned in the same breath. The first and foremost application is to Habakkuk’s countrymen, the wicked who hemmed in the righteous, who paralyzed the law, and perverted justice. They are the ones who indulged in drunkenness. We do not read anywhere that King Nebuchadnezzar was an alcoholic.

In that context also the words “but the righteous will live by his faith” should be read. Because of Paul’s quotation of that verse, we tend to put it in quite a different framework. It is good, however, to first look at the words against the background the prophet places them.

The Pulpit Commentary observes: “The ‘faith’ here spoken of is a loving trust in God, confidence in his promises, resulting in due performance of his will. This hemistich³⁸ is the antithesis to the former. The proud and perverse, those who wish to be independent of God, shall perish; but, on the other hand, the righteous shall live and be saved through his faith, on the condition that he puts his trust in God. The Hebrew accents forbid the union, ‘the just by faith,’ though, of course, no one can be just, righteous, without faith. The passage may be emphasized by rendering, ‘As to the just, through his faith he shall live.’ This famous sentence, which St. Paul has used as the basis of his great argument (Rom. i 17; Gal. iii. 11; comp. Heb. x. 38), in its literal and contextual application implies that the righteous man will have perfect trust in God’s promises, and will be rewarded by being safe in the day of tribulation, with reference to the Chaldeans. When the proud, greedy kingdom shall have sunk in ruin, the faithful people shall live secure. But the application is not confined to this circumstance. The promise looks beyond the temporal future of the Chaldeans and Israelites, and unto a reward that is eternal. We see how naturally the principle here enunciated is applied by the apostle to teach the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ. The LXX gives, . . . ‘by faith in me.’ The Speaker is God. St. Paul omits [me]. Habakkuk gathers into one sentence the whole principle of the Law, and indeed all true religion.”

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary correctly draws the primary application to refer to the faith of the righteous during the siege of Jerusalem, both by Nebuchadnezzar and by Titus. We read: “He that presumes on his safety without any special warrant from God, is a proud man; and whatever he may profess, or think of himself, his mind is not upright in him. But he that is just by faith shall live—he that believes what God hath said relative to the Chaldeans besieging Jerusalem, shall make his escape from the place, and consequently shall save his life. The words in the New Testament are accommodated to the salvation which believers in Christ shall possess. Indeed, the just—the true Christians, who believed in Jesus Christ’s words relative to the destruction of Jerusalem, when they found the Romans coming against it, left the city, and escaped to Pella in Caelesyria, and did live—their lives were saved: while the unbelieving Jews, to a man, either perished or were made slaves. One good sense is, He that believes the promises of God, and has found life through believing, shall live by his faith.” Isaiah prophesies about the result of faith of those who put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ in the words: “So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed.’”³⁹

TLB paraphrases vs. 4 in such a way that the Babylonians are drawn in the picture: “Note this: Wicked men trust themselves alone [as these Chaldeans do], and fail; but the righteous man trusts in me and lives!” I take the one who is “puffed up” to refer primarily to the ungodly inhabitant of Jerusalem. It is faith in God that helps the righteous to live through the dark night of pain and suffering.

With the words: “the righteous will live by his faith” God promises to see us through if we trust Him. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews defines faith as follows: “Now faith is being sure of what we

³⁷ II Peter 3:9

³⁸ This word does not appear in the Webster dictionary. It means “alexandrine.”

³⁹ Isa. 28:16

hope for and certain of what we do not see.”⁴⁰ We sometimes speak about faith as if it is a means in itself. Faith without an object is as useless as a rope thrown to a drowning man without anyone holding the other end. Faith that is not faith in God is worthless. It is not faith that saves; it is God. If God is not the object of our faith, our faith is an illusion.

Barnes' Notes writes about the words “The just shall live by faith”: “The Septuagint translate the passage in Habakkuk, ‘If any man shall draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him, but the just by my faith,’ or by faith in me, ‘shall live.’ The very words are used by them which are employed by the apostle, except they add the word ‘my, ... MY faith. The Syriac renders it in a similar manner, ‘The just by faith shall live.’ The meaning of the Hebrew in Habakkuk is the same. It does not refer originally to the doctrine of justification by faith; but its meaning is this, ‘The just man, or the righteous man, shall live by his confidence in God.’ The prophet is speaking of the woes attending the Babylonish captivity. The Chaldeans were to come upon the land and destroy it, and remove the nation, [Hab.] 1:6-10. But this was not to be perpetual. It should have an end ([Hab.] 2:3), and they who had confidence in God should live ([Hab.] 1:4); that is, should be restored to their country, should be blessed and made happy. Their confidence in God should sustain them, and preserve them. This did not refer primarily to the doctrine of justification by faith, nor did the apostle so quote it, but it expressed a general principle that those who had confidence in God should be happy, and be preserved and blessed. This would express the doctrine which Paul was defending. It was not by relying on his own merit that the Israelite would be delivered, but it was by confidence in God, by his strength and mercy. On the same principle would men be saved under the gospel. It was not by reliance on their own works or merit; it was by confidence in God, by faith, that they were to live.”

We cannot continue our journey through Habakkuk without pausing to see how the apostle Paul uses Habakkuk's words and puts them in a broader context. Paul quotes Habakkuk twice, once in Romans and once in Galatians. The author of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* quotes the same words once. In Romans we read: “For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”⁴¹ Paul's primary intention was to contrast “faith” with the attitude of those who believed that they could pay for their salvation by adhering strictly to the stipulations of the ceremonial law. This is even more clearly expressed in the quotation in Galatians: “Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”⁴² In *Hebrews*, the quote is closer to the context in which we find it in Habakkuk. The author addresses Jews who were persecuted because of their faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. Some had buckled under the pressure and had returned to Judaism. To those who were persecuted he wrote: “So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a very little while, ‘He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him.’ But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.”⁴³

The Adam Clarke's Commentary devotes a rather lengthy paragraph to the meaning of the word “righteous” in Hebrew and in Greek. We read: “There are few words in the sacred writings which are taken in a greater variety of acceptations than the word *tsidqah* ... in Hebrew, and *dikaiousnee* ... in Greek, both of which we generally translate righteousness. Our English word was originally ‘rightwiseness’, from the Anglo-Saxon word for ‘justice, right’, and the Anglo-Saxon word for ‘to know’; and thus the righteous man was a person who was allowed to understand the claims of justice and right, and who, knowing them, acted according to their dictates. Such a man is thoroughly wise; he aims at the attainment of the best end by the use of the best means. This is a true definition of wisdom and the righteous man is he that knows most and acts best. The Hebrew *tsadaq* ..., in its ideal meaning, contains the notion of a beam or scales in equipoise, what we call even balance; and it is well known that in all the personifications of justice, both ancient and modern, she is represented as a beautiful female with a blindfold over her eyes, and a beam and scales in her hand, so perfectly poised that neither end preponderates. The Greek word *dikaiousnee* ... has been derived from *dichazoo*..., to divide; and hence, *dikee*..., justice, because it is the property of this virtue to divide to

⁴⁰ Heb. 11:1

⁴¹ Rom. 1:17

⁴² Gal. 3:11

⁴³ Heb. 10:35-39

each his due. With other etymologies it is useless to trouble the reader. Both the noun *dikaioo* ... and the verb *dikaioo* ... have a great variety of meaning in the New Testament; but they are all reducible to this original idea, acting according to the requisitions of justice or right." At this point, *Clarke* enters into a series of examples in which we will not enter.

In Habakkuk's text, the righteous is obviously the person who acknowledges God and whose life is in accordance with the will of God. The fact that this person must live by faith suggest that circumstances are such that the natural tendency is to doubt that God is in control and that there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Such was the condition under which Habakkuk wrote his prophecy. Israel's moral condition seemed to be beyond redemption and God's remedy seemed worse than the ailment.

In vs. 5, the prophet diverts from the inhabitants of Jerusalem and focuses again on the enemy whose coming he predicts. The NIV gives the reading: "Indeed, wine betrays him; he is arrogant and never at rest. Because he is as greedy as the grave and like death is never satisfied, he gathers to himself all the nations and takes captive all the peoples." TLB paraphrases the verse: "What's more, these arrogant Chaldeans are betrayed by all their wine, for it is treacherous. In their greed they have collected many nations, but like death and hell, they are never satisfied." *The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "The intemperate habits of the Babylonians are well attested (see Dan. v. 3,4...). They used both the fermented sap of the palm tree as well as the juice of the grape, the latter chiefly imported from abroad. 'The wealthy Babylonians were fond of drinking to excess; their banquets were magnificent but generally ended in drunkenness' (Rawlinson...) Neither the Septuagint, nor the Syriac, nor the Coptic Version has any mention of wine in this passage. The Septuagint gives ... 'the arrogant and the scorner.' He is a proud man, neither keepeth at home; a haughty man, he resteth not. His pride is always impelling him to new raids and conquests. This is quite the character of the later Chaldeans, and is consistent with the latter part of the verse. The comparison, then, is this: As wine raises the spirits and excites men to great efforts which in the end deceive them, so pride rouses these men to go on their insatiate course of conquest, which shall one day prove their ruin. The verb translated 'keepeth at home' has the secondary sense of 'being decorous.' ... [As] wine first exhilarates and then makes a man contemptible, so pride, which begins by exalting a man, ends by bringing him to ignominy. Others take the verb in the sense of 'continueth not,' explaining that the destruction of Babylon is here intimated."

Habakkuk follows the lead of Isaiah in singing a song of ridicule and scorn about the king of Babylon. Isaiah clearly sees in the king of Babylon the image of the ultimate adversary. Both prophets look beyond the events of their day or of the immediate future to the end of times when the powers that be will be powers that were. In Isaiah we read: "Those who see you stare at you, they ponder your fate: 'Is this the man who shook the earth and made kingdoms tremble, the man who made the world a desert, who overthrew its cities and would not let his captives go home?'"⁴⁴

The song is the subject of the verses 6-20, in which the word "woe" occurs 5 times. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: "It is a symmetrical whole, and consists of five stanzas, the three first consisting of three verses each, the fourth of four verses, and the last of two. Each stanza has its own subject, and all except the last begin with 'Woe;' and all have a closing verse introduced with 'for,' 'because,' or 'but.'"

It is the general consensus of Bible commentators that the poem of these verses deals with the sins of Babylon. It is true, however, that parts of it may have a more general application. The extortion by the wealthy, for instance, could easily apply to the inhabitants of Jerusalem also. Since Babylon is depicted in the Bible as the ultimate icon of sin and rebellion against God, everything that is said in these verses may be given a wider application.

There exists a tendency to consider plunder in times of war to be less dishonorable than mere theft in times of peace. Some of this can be dated to the times of Israel's conquest of Canaan, when God used His chosen people as an instrument of His wrath for the inhabitants of Canaan. David carried over this principle in his campaigns against the Philistines, which he considered to be an extension of the legitimate mandate given to Israel to clear the Promised Land from its sinful original population. We read in the records of I Samuel, for instance: "When David arrived in Ziklag, he sent some of the plunder to the elders of Judah, who were his friends, saying, 'Here is a present for you from the plunder of the LORD's enemies.'"⁴⁵ Habakkuk puts the record straight by intimating that the mighty army of King Nebuchadnezzar was nothing but a pack of vulgar thieves. We read about this king: "He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God,

⁴⁴ Isa. 14:16,17

⁴⁵ I Sam. 1 30:26

both large and small, and the treasures of the LORD's temple and the treasures of the king and his officials."⁴⁶ The fact that this was God's punishment to the nation of Israel did not make Nebuchadnezzar's act legitimate. An example in recent history is the story of Nazi Germany, in which Adolph Hitler rebuilt the economy of the country by confiscating Jewish assets and carrying of the treasures of the nations he occupied.

About all those criminal acts committed throughout the whole of world history in this world's Babylon, the prophet pronounces his "woe!" The Hebrew word translated "woe" is *howy*, which is an exclamation of pain. It is not so much a punitive word as an expression of compassion. That is not the way we tend to interpret it in this context. Yet it expresses well the pain God feels in contemplating man's corruption. Habakkuk sees the conqueror, who requisitions for his own enrichment whatever pleases him, on the Day of Judgment when the accounts will be settled and the people who were robbed will come to the witness stand. He looks at the mighty man who victimized people and who has become the victim beyond all hope and help.

This world has deviated tremendously from the role God intended man to have in ruling over creation. When God created Adam and Eve, He said: "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."⁴⁷ It was never God's intention that man would rule over man; the entrance of sin corrupted man's original mandate. Sin gave man power over his fellowmen. Lord Acton correctly stated: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." Even Paul's statement about the divine mandate of governments must be placed in the light of this world's sinful condition. In a world without sinful human nature, governments would have no place. But Paul writes: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."⁴⁸

There is a place for capital punishment in God's order of things. God said to Noah: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man."⁴⁹ But, although King Nebuchadnezzar was, in a sense, "God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer," in the shedding of man's blood, of which Habakkuk accuses him in this chapter, he had gone way beyond the mandate God had given him. Nebuchadnezzar, obviously, never considered himself to be God's servant; he was nobody's servant but his own. In God's court, however, he would stand as a war criminal who had committed crimes against humanity.

The second "woe" again has a wider application than to the Babylonian empire alone. The inhabitants of Jerusalem fell under the category of those who "[built their] realm by unjust gain." The great prostitute Babylon, as we find her in Revelation, fits this description. "With her the kings of the earth committed adultery and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries."⁵⁰ The image of the eagle's nest also points to the power behind the Babylonian empire, as it does in Obadiah's

⁴⁶ II Chron. 36:18

⁴⁷ Gen. 1:28

⁴⁸ Rom. 13:1-7

⁴⁹ Gen. 9:6

⁵⁰ Rev. 17:2

prophecy: “ ‘Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,’ declares the LORD.”⁵¹

The magnificent city of Babylon, of which King Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed so proudly: “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”⁵² would become a monumental witness against his majesty on the Day of Judgment. The Bible sometimes speaks in an almost animistic manner about inert things that are witnesses of man’s sin. When Cain killed his brother Abel, God said to him: “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.”⁵³ Jesus, on the other hand, sees in the stones potentials witnesses of His glory. When the religious leaders of His day objected to the children singing in the temple, we read in Luke’s Gospel: “ ‘I tell you,’ he replied, ‘if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.’ ”⁵⁴ Those without a voice can be eloquent witnesses.

Mankind has exhausted itself in the building of monumental cities of which at present not even the dust is preserved. The first example is the building of the tower of Babel, which came to nothing when God took away man’s ability to communicate intelligently with one another in the same language.⁵⁵ I recently read in *The Diary of Joseph Goebels*, Hitler’s minister of propaganda, how the building of his ministry was reduced to rubble by a direct hit of an allied bomb. His Excellency bemoaned the destruction and vowed that he would restore the building to its old glory after the war. He committed suicide, however, about six weeks after he made that entry in his diary.

Habakkuk’s words remind us of the Psalm David wrote after his capture of Jerusalem: “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and throw off their fetters.’ The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ‘I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.’ ”⁵⁶

Habakkuk contrasts the futility of human efforts in his reaching for glory with the coming of the glory of the Lord. Vs. 14 unfolds the vision of the fulfillment of God’s plan: “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” In the Genesis record of creation, we read that the earth was covered with water and darkness before God let His light shine upon it. The hypothesis, which is called “The Gap Theory,” suggests that the chaotic condition of the earth was the result of the fall of Lucifer. If this is correct, the contrast is striking between the waters of chaos that covers the earth and the waters of the knowledge of the glory of the LORD. Habakkuk’s words are found verbatim in Isaiah’s prophecy about the Messianic Kingdom: “They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”⁵⁷ It is impossible to determine which one of the two prophets wrote those words originally.

The Adam Clarke’s Commentary sees the possibility of a three-fold fulfillment of the prophecy, obviously, discounting the doctrine of the millennial Messianic kingdom. We read: “This is a singular and important verse. It may be first applied to Babylon. God’s power and providence shall be widely displayed in the destruction of this city and empire, in the humiliation of Nebuchadnezzar, Dan 4:37, and in the captivity and restoration of his people. See ... Isa 11:9. Secondly. It may be applied to the glorious days of the Messiah. The land of Judea should by his preaching, and that of his disciples, be filled with the knowledge of God. God’s great design fully discovered, and the scheme of salvation amply explained. Thirdly. It may be applied to the universal spread of the Gospel over the habitable globe; when the fullness of the Gentiles should be brought in, and the Jews gathered in with that fullness. The earth cannot perish till every continent, island, and inhabitant, is illuminated with the light of the Gospel.”

⁵¹ Obadiah 4; See also Isa. 14:12-15

⁵² Dan. 4:30

⁵³ Gen. 4:10

⁵⁴ Luke 19:40

⁵⁵ See Gen. 11:6-9

⁵⁶ Ps. 2:1-6

⁵⁷ Isa. 11:9

Barnes' Notes quotes Jerome, saying: "When Babylon shall be overthrown, then shall the power of the might of the Lord be known unto all. So shall the whole earth be filled with the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the bottom of the sea. This as to the letter. But it is plain, that the Devil also and antichrist, and the perverse teaching of heretics, built a city in blood; i.e., their own Church, with the destruction of those whom they deceive ... But when they fall in the fire (either this fire which is felt, or consumed in the fire of the devil their prince, or burned up with the fire whereof the Lord says, 'I came to send a fire upon the earth,' and so brought back from their former course, and doing penitence), the whole earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, when, at the preaching of the apostles, their 'sound shall go out into all the world,' as waters covering the sea, i.e., all the saltiness and bitterness of the world which Satan had rained down and the earth had drunk, the waters of the Lord shall cover, and cause the place of their ancient bitterness not to appear."

Habakkuk's words appear to indicate, however, that God has the plan to restore this planet, and with it probably the whole body of constellations, to the glory of its original creation and beyond. The Lord's glory *is* revealed in His judgment over Babylon, both as a historical city and an icon of rebellion throughout the ages. But it seems that this prophecy has a more cosmic ring to it. As inhabitants of this earth we are moving toward an age of exuberant joy when the world will be covered with the Lord's glory, and we will know it.

We can hardly overestimate the impact such words must have had on those who would be led away in captivity. The Babylonian exile seemed to be the end of all glory, the death of religion, and the death of God. It was this hope that made an inmate of a Nazi concentration camp, Corrie ten Boom, decide to preach the Gospel in all the world upon her release. And the man who was instrumental in our going to the mission field, Willem Könneman, knelt down on the deck of the ship that brought him to a Japanese prison camp praying: "Lord, here am I, send me!" Such is the hope of glory that accompanies us in our darkest hours.

The fourth "woe" is found in verses 15-17. It paints an image of drunkenness and immorality that has a wide application. The first one is obviously a literal one. People are seduced by wine to surrender themselves to sexual immorality. Noah was the first human being to fall into this snare: the Genesis account tells us that he overindulged in the wine his vineyard produced and lay naked in his tent. When his son, Ham, found him thus and mocked him, Noah cursed him and his lineage.⁵⁸ This led to a polarization of the human race that has never subsided. The apostle John saw the same drunkenness and immoral filth personified at the end of world history in the woman who is called with the name "Babylon, the great, mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth." John writes about her: "I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus."⁵⁹

Habakkuk's condemnation serves not only those who give themselves to alcohol and pornography but also those who sell it to others. "Woe to him who gives drink to his neighbors, pouring it from the wineskin till they are drunk, so that he can gaze on their naked bodies." Trade in pornography is probably one of the most lucrative businesses in the world. The devil monopolizes it. He has managed to turn man's sexuality around and instead of allowing man to express a love relationship akin to the spiritual bond with God, he made it one of the most explicit expressions of man's depravity. Habakkuk predicts that the tables will be turned on the Day of Judgment. Those who sell shame "will be filled with shame instead of glory."

The use of the word "glory" is striking in this context. It refers to what God wants man to be. The essence of sin is that it falls short of the glory of God. Paul's definition of sin is: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."⁶⁰ In the words: "be exposed!" the Hebrew contains a reference to un-circumcision. The rendering of the KJV brings this out: "let thy foreskin be uncovered," and the NKJV: "And be exposed as uncircumcised!" The inference is not merely to the ritual but to the fact that the person does not belong to the covenant with God. Paul contrasts glory with shame when he characterizes those who resist the Gospel as: "Their glory is in their shame."⁶¹ God intended man's sexuality to be his glory but sin

⁵⁸ Gen. 9:20-27

⁵⁹ See Rev. 17:5,6

⁶⁰ Rom. 3:23

⁶¹ Phil. 3:19

corrupted this glory so that Adam and Eve felt ashamed when they stood before God because they were naked.⁶²

The cup in the Lord's hand is contrasted with the wine that is served "straight from the bottle" in vs. 13. The Bible often uses the image of a cup of wine for the wrath of God. Asaph uses the figure in one of his Psalms: "In the hand of the LORD is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs."⁶³ And in Revelation, John describes the punishment of Babylon, the icon of sin in the world, with the words: "Give back to her as she has given; pay her back double for what she has done. Mix her a double portion from her own cup."⁶⁴ This is also, probably the sense in which Jesus used the expression when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."⁶⁵

Vs. 17 poses, evidently, some problems of translation. The Hebrew reads literally: "For the violence of Lebanon shall cover thee, and the spoil of beasts, which made them afraid..." The TLB renders this: "You cut down the forests of Lebanon-now you will be cut down! You terrified the wild animals you caught in your traps-now terror will strike you because of all your murdering and violence in cities everywhere." *Barnes' Notes* explains: "Having become beasts, they shared their history. They spoiled, scared, laid waste, were destroyed. 'Whoso seeketh to hurt another, hurteth himself.' The Chaldaean laid waste Judea, scared and wasted its inhabitants; the end of its plunder should be, not to adorn, but to cover them, overwhelm them as in ruins, so that they should not lift up their heads again. Violence returns upon the head of him who did it; they seem to raise a lofty fabric, but are buried under it. He sums up their past experience, what God had warned them beforehand, what they had found." The cedars of Lebanon are often used as a metaphor, as in Isaiah's dirge over the "king of Babylon," who is Satan himself in the context of that prophecy. We read there: "Even the pine trees and the cedars of Lebanon exult over you and say, 'Now that you have been laid low, no woodsman comes to cut us down.'"⁶⁶

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary observes: "Lebanon with its beasts is taken by most commentators allegorically, as a figurative representation of the holy land and its inhabitants. But although it may be pleaded, in support of this view, that Lebanon, and indeed the summit of its cedar forest, is used in Jer 22:6 as a symbol of the royal family of Judaea, and in Jer 22:23 as a figure denoting Jerusalem...[This] view does not answer to the train of thought in the whole of the ode, since the previous strophes do not contain any special allusion to the devastation of the holy land, or the subjugation and ill-treatment of the holy people, but simply to the plundering of many nations, and the gain forced out of their sweat and blood, as being the great crime of the Chaldaean (cf. vv. 8, 10, 13), for which he would be visited with retribution and destruction. Consequently we must take the words literally, as referring to the wickedness practiced by the Chaldaean upon nature and the animal world, as the glorious creation of God, represented by the cedars and cypresses of Lebanon, and the animals living in the forests upon those mountains."

A glance at the recent history of the world reveals scenes of violence similar in nature to the one Habakkuk refers to but carried out on a much larger scale. The twentieth century will go down in history as the century of two world wars in which millions were uprooted and killed. What Nebuchadnezzar did to the Middle East was child's play in comparison with crimes of the Bolsheviks, the Nazis, and the Japanese, who raped this planet and tore it apart. The present picture the world presents is probably close to the one in the days of Noah of which we read: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain."⁶⁷

Verses 18-20 contain the last of the last of the five "woes," although the poem does not commence with that word as the other four. We find it in vs. 19: "Woe to him who says to wood, 'Come to life!' Or to

⁶² Gen. 3:10

⁶³ Ps. 75:8

⁶⁴ Rev. 18:6

⁶⁵ Matt. 26:39

⁶⁶ Isa. 14:8

⁶⁷ Gen. 6:5,6

lifeless stone, 'Wake up!' " The subject is the idolatry upon which the power of the Babylonian empire was founded. The prophet penetrates to the core of the matter in this stanza, which is the spiritual vacuum upon which the power of Babylon was built. Or rather upon the evil powers that filled that vacuum, although this is not specifically mentioned. The emphasis in these verses is upon man's foolishness in deviating from common sense in substituting his relationship with the living God who is above him, with something that is beneath him. The Hebrew uses two words to describe the idol statues: *pecel*, which means a carved image, made of wood, and *maccekah*, which is a cast image. There is also a relationship in Hebrew between the nouns and the verbs used. *Barnes' Notes* explains that the word *yotser* is the same as *yitsrow*, the "fashioner of his fashion." And again 'dumb idols' are '*eliylyim* and *illemiyim*, the second word only slightly varying from the first). He uses the very words which express the relation of man to God, 'the Framer' and 'the thing framed.' "

The Old Testament makes very little mention of the relationship between worship of idol statues and the occult. The apostle Paul hints to this relationship when he writes to the Corinthians: "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords') yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live."⁶⁸ Paul uses a play-on-words in Greek. The word *Elohiym* is commonly used as the name for God. The word used for the idols is '*eliylyim*, which means "nothings." There is no scientific proof that meddling with idol statues leads to occult involvement, but in practice, people who occupy themselves with wood or metal as object of worship, can enter into a domain of spiritual powers in which they become like sheep among the wolves. The Old Testament, however, does not stress this point so much as the stupidity of an intelligent human being who surrenders himself to something that is many stages below him on the echelon of creation.

Habakkuk's words have the same ring as those of Isaiah, who reserved some of his strongest ire for the makers of idols. We read there: "All who make idols are nothing, and the things they treasure are worthless. Those who would speak up for them are blind; they are ignorant, to their own shame. Who shapes a god and casts an idol, which can profit him nothing?"⁶⁹ And: "Half of the wood he burns in the fire; over it he prepares his meal, he roasts his meat and eats his fill. He also warms himself and says, 'Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.' From the rest he makes a god, his idol; he bows down to it and worships. He prays to it and says, 'Save me; you are my god.' "⁷⁰

Habakkuk personalizes the idol by calling it "an image that teaches lies." *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary* understands this to mean: "The idol is a teacher of lying, inasmuch as it sustains the delusion, partly by itself and partly through its priests, that it is God, and can do what men expect from God; whereas it is nothing more than a dumb nonentity." Ultimately, it is man who lies to himself. When we create our own gods, we do this in the belief that we can manipulate them. Our recognition of an idol's divine nature is a means to keep our finger in the pie. In as much as all lies originate with the Father of Lies, we become his victims. It is he who does the manipulation.

God pronounces His "woe" on those who exchange Him, the ultimate truth, with a lie. Sin entered this world through the lie. See in what a woeful condition this has brought us.

Jeremiah spells out most clearly what this exchange means. He says: "They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."⁷¹ And: "O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water."⁷²

In the last verse of this chapter, Habakkuk not only contrasts the idols with the Lord but also silence with silence. In idolatry, the idols are silent and man speaks; in true worship man is silent and God speaks.

⁶⁸ I Cor. 8:4-6

⁶⁹ Isa. 44:9,10

⁷⁰ Isa. 44:16,17

⁷¹ Jer. 2:13

⁷² Jer. 17:13

The Matthew Henry's Commentary comments beautifully on this verse: "Now see here ... How the people of God triumph in him, and therewith support themselves, when the idolaters thus shame themselves (v. 20): But the Lord is in his holy temple.

(1.) Our rock is not as their rock, Deut 32:31. Theirs are dumb idols; ours is Jehovah, a living God, who is what he is, and not, as theirs, what men please to make him. He is in his holy temple in heaven, the residence of his glory, where we have access to him in the way, not which we have invented, but which he himself has instituted. Compare Ps 115:3, But our God is in the heavens, and Ps 11:4.

(2.) The multitude of their gods which they set up, and take so much pains to support, cannot thrust out our God; he is, and will be, in his holy temple still, and glorious in holiness. They have laid waste his temple at Jerusalem; but he has a temple above that is out of the reach of their rage and malice, but within the reach of his people's faith and prayers.

(3.) Our God will make all the world silent before him, will strike the idolaters as dumb as their idols, convincing them of their folly, and covering them with shame. He will silence the fury of the oppressors, and check their rage against his people.

(4.) It is the duty of his people to attend him with silent adoring (Ps 65:1), and patiently to wait for his appearing to save them in his own way and time. Be still, and know that he is God, Zech 2:13."

The words are given for the benefit of both the people of Israel, who had exchanged God for their idols, as for King Nebuchadnezzar who would come to the recognition that "no other god can save in this way."⁷³ He gave this testimony: "It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me. How great are his signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation."⁷⁴

When Habakkuk spoke these words, the temple in Jerusalem still stood. Even though the words ultimately refer to the throne in heaven and "the one who [sits] there [who has] the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, [encircling] the throne,"⁷⁵ the day would come when King Nebuchadnezzar would destroy the building in Jerusalem. That day would go down in history as one of the darkest. It foreshadows the day when the real temple of the Lord, the body of our Lord Jesus Christ was destroyed at the cross. All this did not change the fact that the Lord God is in His holy temple, sitting on the throne of the universe. The real temple was restored to its full glory in three days, according to Jesus' words: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."⁷⁶

Habakkuk's recognition of God's glory forms the bridge between the first two chapters and the last one of his book. One of the darkest pages in Jewish history was about to be turned, but the last chapter of the book reveals the full glory of God, greater and deeper than the oceans of this world we live on. We will live to see it. In John's words: "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."⁷⁷

II. The Praise of Habakkuk 3

A. Habakkuk Prays for God's Mercy 3:1-2

1 A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth.

2 LORD, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, O LORD. Renew them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy.

Habakkuk's prayer is one of most moving and beautiful poems in world literature. Scholars have debated the meaning of the word *shigionoth* almost ever since it was first written down. The people of Habakkuk's day understood, of course, clearly what it meant. After the Babylonian Captivity had ended and

⁷³ Dan. 3:29

⁷⁴ Dan. 4:2,3

⁷⁵ Rev. 4:3

⁷⁶ John 2:19

⁷⁷ I John 2:17

Aramaic had replaced the Hebrew language in everyday life, some Hebrew words lost their obvious meaning.

Strong's Concordance indicates that *Shiggayown* or *Shiggayonah* is derived from *shagah*, which has wide variety of meaning, such as: "to stray," "to mistake, or transgress," but also with the idea of intoxication: "to reel," or "to be enraptured." The *Dictionary* suggests the meaning "a dithyramb or rambling poem." The text of this beautiful poem hardly gives any ground for such a title. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* understands *shigionoth* to be "a musical phrase, 'after the manner of elegies,' or mournful odes." The *Commentary* states: "Habakkuk thus teaches his countrymen to confess not only their more grievous sins, but also their errors and negligences, into which they were especially likely to fall when in exile away from the Holy Land (Calvin). So the Vulgate, and Aquila and Symmachus. 'For voluntary transgressors' (Jerome). Probably the subject would regulate the kind of music, so that the style of music, like its subject, would be erratic. Delitsch and Henderson translate 'With triumphal music,' from the same root, to err, implying its enthusiastic irregularity."

The key thought of Habakkuk's psalm is stated in the words: "In wrath remember mercy." The prophet begins by reaching back into Israel's history. He expresses the same thought as Gideon, who said to the angel of the LORD: "If the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' "78 Like Gideon, the prophet wants to see the same demonstration of power as when God brought Israel out of Egypt and led them into the Promised Land.

The Hebrew text reads literally: "I have heard thy speech, O LORD, and was afraid." The KJV renders the verse as such. TLB reads: "O Lord, now I have heard your report, and I worship you in awe for the fearful things you are going to do." As the NIV, TLB considers the Hebrew word *shema* to mean something spoken about God, not necessarily God's own spoken Word.

It is imperative that every generation learns to understand God's revelation. This does not necessarily mean that the facts of salvation are repeated over and over again.0 Israel was led out of Egypt and brought into Canaan only once. But the children of the people who did not experience God's "fearful things" in their own lives, must understand that the same God who did this for their fathers is present in their generation. The resurrection of Jesus Christ occurred only once in history, but the power of His resurrection ought to work in the lives of all who live in this present age.

B. Habakkuk Remembers God's Mercy 3:3-15

3 God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran. Selah

His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth.

4 *His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand, where his power was hidden.*

5 *Plague went before him; pestilence followed his steps.*

6 *He stood, and shook the earth; he looked, and made the nations tremble. The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed. His ways are eternal.*

7 *I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish.*

8 *Were you angry with the rivers, O LORD? Was your wrath against the streams? Did you rage against the sea when you rode with your horses and your victorious chariots?*

9 *You uncovered your bow, you called for many arrows. Selah You split the earth with rivers;*

10 *the mountains saw you and writhed. Torrents of water swept by; the deep roared and lifted its waves on high.*

11 *Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightning of your flashing spear.*

12 *In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations.*

13 *You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness, you stripped him from head to foot. Selah*

14 *With his own spear you pierced his head when his warriors stormed out to scatter us, gloating as though about to devour the wretched who were in hiding.*

15 *You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters.*

⁷⁸ Judg. 6:13

For Habakkuk, the history of salvation would play itself in reverse. Israel was about evicted from the Promised Land. That fact makes his psalm so heartrending and significant. When God told Habakkuk: "Look at the nations and watch- and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own,"⁷⁹ he must have made the connection with Moses' prophecy to Israel, warning them what would happen if they would leave the Lord: "The LORD will drive you and the king⁰ you set over you to a nation unknown to you or your fathers. There you will worship other gods, gods of wood and stone. You will become a thing of horror and an object⁰ of scorn and ridicule to all the nations where the LORD will drive you."⁸⁰

The wrath of God was coming unavoidably but *OHabakkuk's* prayer stands as a vigil in the gap assuring that punishment will not cause annihilation but rejuvenation. The expression "remember mercy" originates with David, who wrote in one of his psalms: "Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old."⁸¹ *In periods of utter darkness, the prayer of one man can make all the difference in the world. Jesus' prayer for Peter saved him from the total despair his denial could have caused. Jesus told him: "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."*⁸² That was the reason why Peter repented in bitter tears and the Lord could restore him.

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary introduces Habakkuk's psalm with the following comments: "The description of this theophany rests throughout upon earlier lyrical descriptions of the revelations of God in the earlier times of Israel. Even the introduction (v. 3) has its roots in the song of Moses in Deut 33:2; and in the further course of the ode we meet with various echoes of different psalms (compare v. 6 with Ps 18:8; v. 8 with Ps 18:10; v. 19 with Ps 18:33-34; also v. 5 with Ps 68:25; v. 8 with Ps 68:5,34). The points of contact in vv. 10-15 with Ps. 77:17-21, are still more marked, and are of such a kind that Habakkuk evidently had the psalm in his mind, and not the writer of the psalm the hymn of the prophet, and that the prophet has reproduced in an original manner such features of the psalm as were adapted to his purpose. This is not only generally favored by the fact that Habakkuk's prayer is composed throughout after the poetry of the Psalms, but still more decidedly by the circumstance that Habakkuk depicts a coming redemption under figures borrowed from that of the past, to which the singer of this psalm looks back from his own mournful times, comforting himself with the picture of the miraculous deliverance of his people out of Egypt. ... For it is very evident that Habakkuk does not describe the mighty acts of the Lord in the olden time, in order to assign a motive for his prayer for the deliverance of Israel out of the affliction of exile which awaits it in the future, as many of the earlier commentators supposed, but that he is predicting a future appearance of the Lord to judge the nations, from the simple fact that he places the future *yaabow'* (came) (v. 3) at the head of the whole description, so as to determine all that follows; whilst it is placed beyond the reach of doubt by the impossibility of interpreting the theophany historically, i.e., as relating to an earlier manifestation of God. This he sees in the form of a theophany, which is fulfilled before his mental eye; hence *yaabow'0* does not describe what is future, as being absolutely so, but is something progressively unfolding itself from the present onwards, which we should express by the present tense."

Barnes' Notes observes about Habakkuk's prayer: "God had already promised by Micah (Mic 7:15), 'According to the days of thy coming out of the land of Egypt, I will show him marvelous things.' Isaiah had often used the great⁰ events of that deliverance as the symbols of the future. So now Habakkuk, in one vast panorama, as it were, without distinction of time or series of events, exhibits the future in pictures of the past. In the description itself which follows, he now speaks in the past, now in the future; of which times the future might be a vivid present; and the past a prophetic past. As a key to the whole, he says, 'God shall come,' indicating that all which follows, however spoken, was a part of that future. In no other way⁰ was it an answer to that prayer, 'Revive Thy work.' To foretell future deliverances in plain words, had been a comfort; it would have promised a continuance of that work. The unity and revival of the work is expressed, in that the past is made, as it was, the image of the future. That future was to be wondrous, superhuman;

⁷⁹ *0ch.* 1:5,6

⁸⁰ Deut. 28:36,37

⁸¹ Ps. 25:6

⁸² Luke 22:31,32

elsewhere the past miracles *Ohad* been no image of it. It was to be no mere repetition of the future; and to mark this, the images are exhibited out of their historical order.”

Reaching back in history to the conquest of Canaan, the prophet sees the picture replayed before his eyes.

The Adam Clarke's Commentary comments on the words: “God came from Teman:” “Dr. Lowth observes: ‘This is a sudden burst of poetry, in the true spirit of the ode; the concealed connection being that God, who had formerly displayed such power in delivering the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, might succor their posterity in a like wonderful manner.’ Hence, the prophet selects the most striking facts of that first deliverance; and to decorate and render them impressive, brings forth all the powers of his genius, in all the strength and elegance of his language. ‘What crowns the sublimity of this piece,’ says Dr. Lowth, ‘is the singular elegance of the close; and were it not that antiquity has here and there thrown its veil of obscurity over it, there could not be conceived a more perfect and masterly poem of its kind.’ ... I shall endeavor to show the facts in the deliverance from Egypt, to which the prophet refers. [Teman] This was a city, the capital of a province of Idumea, to the south of the land of Canaan. Num 20:21; Jer 49:7. [Paran] Was a city which gave its name to *o* a province in Arabia Petraea. Gen 21:21; Deut 33:2. [Selah] This word is not well known; probably it means a pause or alteration in the music. See it *o* in the Psalms, and its explanation there. [His glory covered the *Oheavens*] His glory when he **o**descended on Mount Sinai, and in the pillar of fire by night. [The earth was full of his praise.] All the land was astonished at the magnificence of his works in behalf of his people. Instead of praise, some translate splendor. The whole land was illuminated by his glory.”

The best thing we can ever do is to remember the facts of salvation, as Habakkuk did. The difference for us is that we have so much more to fall back on than the history of a people who were brought out from slavery into freedom. In the words of the apostle Paul: “What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”⁸³ The God who leads us through the dark tunnels, the valley of the shadow of death, is the God “who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all.” The facts of salvation are proof of the character of God.

In rehearsing the facts of salvation, the conquest of Canaan, Habakkuk sings: “His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth. His splendor was like the sunrise; rays flashed from his hand, where his power was hidden.” As the prophet sees the Babylonian army marching toward Jerusalem and knowing that they will destroy the city, he sings: “My eyes have seen the coming of the *o* glory of the Lord.” The eye of faith sees the Invisible. That is the testimony the writer of Hebrews gives about Moses: “He persevered because he saw him *o* who is invisible.”⁸⁴

In connection with the conquest of Canaan, God had foretold Moses: “I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run.”⁸⁵ ***And, in the Psalms, David describes God's victory over His enemies: “May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him. As smoke is blown away by the wind, may you blow them away; as wax melts before the fire, may the wicked perish before God.”***⁸⁶

The NIV reads vs. 3 – “God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran.” Some versions render the verb in the present or even in the future tense. As we have seen from earlier quotations, the Hebrew expresses a variety of tenses which indicate the different dimensions of this prophecy.

Most commentators agree that Habakkuk's prayer borrows images from Moses' song in Deuteronomy. “God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran,” obviously, owes it inspiration from Moses' words: “The LORD came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir; he shone forth from Mount Paran. He came with myriads of holy ones from the south, from his mountain slopes.”⁸⁷

⁸³ Rom. 8:31,32

⁸⁴ Heb. 11:27

⁸⁵ Ex. 23:27

⁸⁶ Ps. 68:1,2

⁸⁷ Deut. 33:2

The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary states: “The two localities lie opposite to one another, and are only separated by the Arabah (or deep valley of the Ghor). We are not to understand the naming **of** these two, however, as suggesting the idea that God was coming from the Arabah, but, according to the original passage in Deut 33:2, as indicating that the splendor of the divine appearance spread over Teman and the mountains of Paran, so that the rays were reflected from the two mountainous regions. The word *Selâh* does not form part of the subject-matter of the text, but shows *that* the music strikes in here when the song is used in the temple, taking up the lofty thought that God is coming, and carrying **it** out in a manner befitting the majestic appearance, in the prospect of the speedy help of the Lord.”

The words of Habakkuk make us look up to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory. The apostle Paul writes about **this**: “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief **to** you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels.”⁸⁸

Habakkuk’s mention of the tents of Cushan has caused confusion and disagreement among the scholars. Some think Ethiopia is meant, others that it is “a part of the territory over which the Midianites roamed, and that it was from here that Zipporah, Moses’ wife, who is called a Cushite, came” (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*). The Book of Judges mentions Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim. We read: “The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, so that he became Israel’s judge and went to war. The LORD gave Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram into the hands of Othniel, who overpowered him.”⁸⁹ *The Keil & Delitzsch Commentary, however, states: “By Cushan we are not to understand the Mesopotamian king named Cushan Rishathaim, who subjugated Israel for eight years after the death of Joshua (Judg 3:8ff.); for this neither agrees with ‘aahaaleey ... nor with the introduction of Midian in the parallel clause. The word is a lengthened form for Such, and the name of the African Ethiopians. The Midianites are mentioned along with them, as being inhabitants of the Arabian coast of the Red Sea, which was opposite to them ..., ‘aahaaleey ..., the tents with their inhabitants, the latter being principally intended. The same remark applies to y’riy’owt ..., lit., the tent-curtains of the land of Midian, i.e., of the tents pitched in the land of Midian.”*

Barnes’ Notes observes: “Cushan is one of the names of Midian or one of its tribes, and it is also called Cush.”

Habakkuk’s remarks about the rivers, the streams, and the sea are not without a touch of humor. The psalmist assumes the same mocking tone when he addresses the Red Sea and the **Jordan** River: “The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; the mountains skipped like rams, **the** hills like lambs. Why was it, O sea, that you fled, O Jordan, that you turned back, you mountains, that you skipped like rams, you hills, like lambs?”⁹⁰ Obviously, the wrath of the Lord was not directed against the water but against the enemy of His people. God used the sea and the river, first to give free passage to Israel on their way to freedom and dignity, and then against the enemy who sought to kill God’s chosen ones. It is interesting to see how Habakkuk uses particularly those incidents of deliverance at the moment that Nebuchadnezzar advances for the purpose of vanquishing Israel. *Barnes’ Notes* quotes Jerome who commented on this passage: “As Thou didst dry up the Jordan and the Red Sea, fighting for us; for Thou wert not wroth with the rivers or the sea, nor could things without sense offend Thee; so now mounting Thy chariots, and taking Thy bow, Thou wilt give salvation to Thy people; and the oaths which Thou swearest to our fathers and the tribes, Thou wilt fulfill forever.”

Vs. 9 again has sent the scholars scurrying **for** explanations. The Hebrew text reads literally: “Thy bow was made quite naked, according to the oaths of the tribes, even thy word. Selah.” *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “Of all the clauses in the entire prophecy, this is probably the most difficult to explain. As it stands, it must be an interpolation, meaning that Judah’s only hope is in God’s covenant promise, particularly of the Sinaitic or Mosaic Covenant. In one small group of ancient manuscripts this phrase reads, ‘thou dost fill thy quiver with shafts,’ which makes good sense but does not have support in the

⁸⁸ II Thess 1:6,7

⁸⁹ Judg. 3:8,10

⁹⁰ Ps. 114:3-6

best Hebrew manuscripts.” The NKJV renders this: “Your bow was made quite ready; Oaths were sworn over Your arrows.” TLB cuts through the Gordian knot with: “All saw your power!”

The sentence “You split the earth with rivers” does not fare any better. It could be that the prophet moves back and forth between a picture of God as Savior and God as Creator, but most commentators believe that the words give a description of an earthquake caused by the coming of the Lord. Some go to quite some length to spiritualize the text. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* quotes Grotius who “refers it to the bringing forth of water from the **rock (Ex 17:6, ‘the rock in Horeb,’** when the people [chided] Moses because of their want of water at Rephidim; Num 20:10-11, at Meribah, when Moses ‘smote the rock twice;’ Ps. 67:15-16; 105:41). But the context implies, not the giving of water to His people to drink, but the fearful physical phenomena attending Yahweh’s attack on Israel’s foes.”

The language is highly poetical and it would be impossible to pinpoint any incident in the history of Israel’s redemption, either during the desert journey or in the conquest of Canaan, that corresponds directly to the picture drawn here of an earthquake that created new rivers or changed the flow of others. The standing still of the sun and moon is, of course, adequately recording in Joshua when, during battle with the five Amorite kings, Joshua commanded the sun to stand still. We read: “On the day the LORD gave the Amorites over to Israel, Joshua said to the LORD in the presence of Israel: ‘O sun, stand still over Gibeon, O moon, over the Valley of Aijalon.’ So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the LORD listened to a man. Surely the LORD was fighting for Israel!”⁹¹ The answer to Joshua’s prayer is on record as one of the most amazing instances of answered prayer in Scripture. Habakkuk’s appeal to this incident, therefore, gives added force to his confidence in God. The prophet’s prayer is addressed to God, the Savior, who revealed Himself to Israel in such an astounding way. Habakkuk’s appeal to God in this manner is equal to our calling upon our heavenly Father, who is the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. The apostle Paul expresses Habakkuk’s attitude toward God in New Testament terms: “And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.”⁹²

In verses 12 and 13, the prophet switches from the plural to the singular, speaking about “your anointed one,” and “the leader of the land of wickedness.” The Hebrew word, translated “anointed one” is *mashiyach* from which is derived: “the Messiah.” This indicates that behind every human war there is the cosmic confrontation between God and Satan that is fought out in the heavenlies. Not only would Israel eventually be delivered from the Babylonian Captivity, but Satan would ultimately be stripped and crushed, as was done when Jesus, the Anointed One, died on the cross. The apostle Paul states: “Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”⁹³ ***When Jesus was “stripped head to foot,” the shame of Satan was exposed in the nakedness of sin. This will find its culmination on the day when “the devil, who deceived them, [is] thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”***⁹⁴

Verses 14 and 15 combine the victory over Sisera with the annihilation of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea. We read **Sisera’s** story in the Book of Judges. When his army lost, we read: “Sisera, however, fled on foot to the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, because there were friendly relations between Jabin king of Hazor and the clan of Heber the Kenite. Jael went out to meet Sisera and said to him, ‘Come, my lord, come right in. Don’t be afraid.’ So he entered her tent, and she put a covering over him. ‘I’m thirsty,’ he said. ‘Please give me some water.’ She opened a skin of milk, gave him a drink, and covered him up. ‘Stand in the doorway of the tent,’ he told her. ‘If someone comes by and asks you, ‘ ‘Is anyone here?’ ‘ say ‘ ‘No.’ ‘

⁹¹ Josh. 10:12-14

⁹² Rom. 8:11

⁹³ Col. 2:15

⁹⁴ Rev. 20:10

But Jael, Heber's wife, picked up a tent peg and a hammer and went quietly to him while he lay fast asleep, exhausted. She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died."⁹⁵

Pharaoh's fate is recorded in Exodus: "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and *all* that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on *their* right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, 'Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.' Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen.' Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen--the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived."⁹⁶

History will repeat itself. At the end of time, the redeemed will again gather at the shore of a sea and sing their hymn of triumph over the Antichrist and his master. We read John's description of this event in Revelation: "And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb..."⁹⁷

C. Habakkuk Trusts in God's Salvation

3:16-19

16 I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.

17 Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,

18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.

19 The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.

In vs. 16, Habakkuk reaches the moment of crisis. There is the inward clash of the two opposites, the facts of salvation, which indicate that God does save, and heal, and restore, and the vision of the immediate future in which he sees the coming of the Babylonian army that will kill, destroy, and carry away in captivity. He has seen both visions. On a smaller scale, we often receive the same conflicting signals. We see instances of people being healed in answer to simple prayer and others, for whom hundreds of prayers went up, succumb to their illness and die. Habakkuk reacts strongly to this kind of divine "inconsistency." He says: "I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled." It made him physically ill. We do not read how he came to terms with this but there must have been an obvious act of surrender which resulted in "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, [guarding his heart and his mind] in Christ Jesus."⁹⁸

Habakkuk came to the same point in his life where Job had arrived in his testing. We read about Job: "Then Job replied to the LORD: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. [You asked,] 'Who is this that obscures my counsel without knowledge?' ' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to **know**. [You said,] 'Listen now, and I will speak; I will question you, and you shall answer me.' ' My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.

⁹⁵ Judg. 4:17-21

⁹⁶ Ex.14:21-28

⁹⁷ Rev. 15:2,3

⁹⁸ Phil. 4:7

Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.’”⁹⁹ The peace of Christ Jesus descended upon Habakkuk’s soul when he said to God: “I give up.”

God did not answer Habakkuk’s questions from the beginning of his book: “Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?” and: “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?”¹⁰⁰ There was no answer but the questions stopped. The mystery is inexplicable, but that is the way the peace of Christ Jesus descends upon every human soul. It doesn’t mean that God doesn’t want us to ask questions; otherwise, Habakkuk’s inspired prophecy **would** not be found in the Bible. It means that God gives us a sense of trust in Him when we recognize that He is greater than any question we can ask.

Habakkuk’s crisis experience is more complicated than appears on the surface. It is also encased in words that are difficult to interpret. Our first impression is that the prophet’s trembling pertains to the coming of God’s judgment over Israel, but a closer look reveals that it refers to the fate that will come upon Israel’s enemies. The Hebrew reads literally: “Trouble when he cometh up unto the people, he will invade them with his troops.” The KJV stays closely to the original. The NIV reads: “Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.” TLB paraphrases: “I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon the people who invade us.” The reaction Habakkuk feels in his body upon the judgment over Babylon betrays feelings of compassion. Quite unlike Jonah’s reaction to the salvation of Nineveh, God’s judgment upon Babylon awakens in Habakkuk a passion for souls. The Bible generally speaks about the judgment over Babylon in terms of rejoicing. While “the merchants of the earth will weep and mourn,”¹⁰¹ the Holy Spirit encourages us: “Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you.”¹⁰² ***Habakkuk’s conflicting emotions, however, are a very appropriate reaction to the lostness of man.***

Verses 17 and 18 paint a picture of the Promised Land under the judgment of God. When God first unfolded His plan of salvation to Moses, He said: “I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey--the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.”¹⁰³ The land Habakkuk depicts for us is a scorched earth in which nothing grows and where people starve to death. *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments on this: “[Although the fig tree shall not blossom] *Tipraach*... ‘shall not **flourish**,’ shall not put forth its young figs, for the fig tree does not blossom. The young figs appear as soon as the old ones are ripe, as I have often had occasion to observe. This verse most nervously paints the desolate state of the land of Judea during the captivity. In its hemistich form, it may be translated thus:

For the fig tree shall not flourish,
And there shall be no fruit on the vines;
The fruit of the olive shall fail,
And the fields shall supply no food:
The flocks shall be cut off from the fold,
And no herds shall be found in the stalls:
Yet in Yahweh will I exult;
I will joy in the God of my salvation.

The Vulgate has: Yet I in the Lord will rejoice, and will exult in Jesus my God. The Targum countenances this version: ... ‘But in the WORD of the Lord will I rejoice,**o**’ i.e., the personal, substantial Word of Yahweh. These two verses give the finest display of resignation and confidence that I have ever met with. He saw *that* evil was at hand, and **unavoidable**; he submitted to the dispensation of God, whose Spirit enabled him to paint it in all its calamitous circumstances. He knew that God was merciful and

⁹⁹ Job 42:1-6

¹⁰⁰ ch. 1: 3,13

¹⁰¹ See Rev. 18:11

¹⁰² Rev. 18:20

¹⁰³ Ex. 3:8

gracious. He trusted to his promise, though all appearances were against its fulfillment; for he knew that the word of Yahweh could not fail, and therefore his confidence is unshaken. No paraphrase can add anything to this hymn, which is full of inexpressible dignity and elegance, leaving even its unparalleled piety out of **the** question.”

The Promised Land Habakkuk describes is like a moonscape. It takes us back to the time before God spoke: “Let there be light!” When “the earth was formless and empty, [and] darkness was over the surface of the deep,” before even “the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”¹⁰⁴ ***This land is unfit for human habitation. Habakkuk says that, even if things become as bad as they can ever be, he will rejoice in the Lord.***

Barnes' Notes asks the question: “But whence the source of this measureless unutterable joy?” And the reply is: “In the Lord, the Unchangeable God, ‘who is and was and is to come,’ I AM (it is the incommunicable Name); in the God of my salvation: it is almost the Name of Jesus; (NOTE: Chaldee, The Syriac: ‘God my Redeemer.’ Septuagint: ‘God my Savior.’) ‘in God the Author of my redemption,’ Jesus in Hebrew *Yeeshuwa* ... , here *yeshu* ... for JESUS is salvation, and the Name means ‘the Lord is Salvation;’ whence the words are here rendered even by a Jew ... ‘in God the Author of my redemption,’ and yet more sweetly by a father, Augustine, ...: ‘To me what some manuscripts have; ‘I will rejoice in God my Jesus,’ **the** seems better than what they have, who have not set the Name itself (but saving) which to us it is more loving and sweeter to name.’) ‘in God my Jesus.’ In Him his joy begins, to Him and in Him it flows back and on; before he ventures, amid all the desolation, to speak of joy, he names the Name of God, and, as it were, stays himself in God, is enveloped and wrapped round in God; and I (the words stand in this order) ‘and I in the Lord would shout for joy.’ He comes, as it were, and places himself quite close to God, so that nothing, not even his joy should be between himself and God; ‘and I in the Lord.’ All creation, as it had failed, ceases to be; all out of God: he speaks of nothing but himself and God, or rather himself in God; and as He, God, comes before his joy, as its source, so in Him does he lose himself, with joy which cannot be contained, nor expressed, nor rest, but utters itself in the glad motions of untiring love. ‘I would bound for joy in my Saving God.’ Truly all our joy is, to be in Him in whom is all Good, who is all Goodness and all Love.”

We cannot go beyond this profound expression of faith and joy. God has given us fig trees and grape vines to rejoice over. Sheep and cattle may be a source of security and stability to us, but none provide us with the foundation upon which our life should be built. Only God offers us hope in the most desolate of circumstances, so that said the author of the Hebrew Epistle: “we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. **We** have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.”¹⁰⁵

There are (in the midst of the deep darkness and gloom Habakkuk depicts) colors and tones of brightness and joy that are not even surpassed in the New Testament. The desolation of Habakkuk’s moonscape is an image of the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. The whole period of Babylonian Captivity during which Jerusalem lay in ruin and the temple was destroyed was a picture of the broken body of our Lord. *Habakkuk’s* joy reflects the joy of the resurrection of the dead. Jesus expressed this exuberant joy to the apostle John with the words: “I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!”¹⁰⁶ According to the apostle Peter, we will share in Christ’s joy. He says: “Though you have not seen him, **you** love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Gen. 1:2

¹⁰⁵ Heb. 6:18-20

¹⁰⁶ Rev. 1:17,18

¹⁰⁷ I Pet. 1:8,9

The prophet borrows unashamedly from David, who wrote: “The LORD is my light and my **Osalvation--whom** shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life--of whom shall I be afraid?”¹⁰⁸ And: “He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to stand on the heights.”¹⁰⁹

The Hebrew word rendered here “strength” is *chayil*, which can mean “a force, whether of men, means or other resources; an army, wealth, virtue, valor.”

Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words writes about *chayil*: “This word signifies a faculty or ‘power,’ the ability to effect or produce something. The word is used of physical ‘strength’ in the sense of power that can be exerted: ‘If the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength...’ Eccl 10:10. Quite often this word appears in a military context. Here it is the physical strength, power, and ability to perform in battle that is in view. This idea is used of men in 1 Sam 2:4: ‘The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength’ (cf. Ps 18:32,39). Ps 33:17 applies the word to a warhorse. An interesting meaning of *chayil* appears in Num 24:17-18, where Balaam prophesied the destruction of Moab and Edom at the hands of Israel: ‘And Edom shall be a possession, Seir also shall be a possession for his enemies; and Israel shall do valiantly’ v. 18. The idea here is dynamic; something is happening. One might also render this phrase: ‘Israel performs mightily.’ This translation of the word is somewhat inexact; a noun is translated as an adverb. Several passages use the word in the sense of ‘**able**.’ In Gen 47:6 the ability to do a job well is in view. Pharaoh told Joseph: ‘The land of Egypt is before thee; in the best of the land make thy father and brethren to dwell; in the land of Goshen let them dwell: and if thou knowest any men of activity [capable men] among them, then make them rulers over my cattle.’ This word can also represent the domestic skills of a woman-- Ruth is described as a woman of ability and, therefore, either potentially or actually a good wife Ruth 3:11; Prov 12:4. When applied to men, *chayil* sometimes focuses on their ability to conduct themselves well in battle as well as being loyal to their commanders 1 Sam 14:52; 1 Kings 1:42. When used in such contexts, the word may be translated ‘valiant’: ‘And there was sore war against the Philistines all the days of Saul: and when Saul saw any strong man, or any valiant man, he took *Ohim* unto him’ 1 Sam 14:52; cf. Num 24:18; 1 Sam 14:48.”

In the light of the fact that Habakkuk uses the image of the feet of a deer who scales the high places, his use of the word *chayil* must probably be interpreted as an ability, a physical burst of energy to do what is not normally within the scope of one’s capability. Isaiah expresses the meaning of this “mountain top experience”: “You will find your joy in the LORD, and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.”¹¹⁰ ***As the physical image of the Promised Land is being destroyed, God introduces the prophet to the spiritually antitype of which Canaan was the shadow. In the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews: “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.”***¹¹¹

Habakkuk does not merely state that the Lord gives him strength but “The Sovereign LORD is my strength.” The Sons of Korah pronounced those blessed whose strengths is Yahweh Adonay. We read: “Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.”¹¹² David also expressed this experience in his prayer: “Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.”¹¹³

God showed Habakkuk the coming of one of the darkest moments in Israel’s history. We don’t know if the prophet was still alive when King Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. In God’s inscrutable wisdom, the presence of the Lord made this terrible experience “His Finest Hour.” For those

¹⁰⁸ Ps. 27:1

¹⁰⁹ II Sam. 22:34

¹¹⁰ Isa. 58:14

¹¹¹ Heb. 4:9,10

¹¹² Ps. 84:5-7

¹¹³ Ps. 61:2

who know the Lord, emotional well-being is not determined by circumstances but by a sense of His presence.

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