

Allan MacRae, Habakkuk, Message

This is a message delivered by Dr. Allan MacRae at Biblical Theological Seminary on Habakkuk:

This morning I wanted to call your attention to one of the finest books in the Old Testament, but not one of the best known. It is one of the Minor Prophets. It's too bad that we have simply taken over the Latin words "major prophets" and "minor prophets". In Latin, they really just mean "longer" or "shorter" but many people might get the impression that because we call something a "minor prophet" therefore it is in some way inferior. This book is inferior to no book of the Bible. And proportional to its size, it is probably quoted as much in the New Testament as any book of the Old Testament. It is to the book of Habakkuk to which I wish to call your attention.

Now this book of Habakkuk is very important for what it teaches. It is also important for the illustration that it gives us of the way that God spoke to and with the prophets and the way that he used the prophets. There is one difference between reading the prophetic books and reading, for instance, the works of Shakespeare. In Shakespeare you find that at the beginning of every talk, there is the name of the person who is talking. We do not have those insertions in the Bible. Consequently, there are times when we are not sure who is speaking. God has inspired it all, and it was kept from error. But much of the prophetic books consist of the words that the prophets spoke and some even consist of quotations from those whom the prophet is rebuking. In this book of Habakkuk, we have a conversation, you might say, between the prophet and the Lord. And we learn much from his conversation with God.

Now the book begins with the words, "The burden, or oracle, which Habakkuk the prophet did see." Now this word "burden" is used in the Old Testament of something that is lifted up or carried, but is often used for a message that the prophet had. In this case, both meanings would apply because this is not merely giving the message that God gave Habakkuk, but it is showing us the burden that Habakkuk had upon his heart and upon his soul.

So, the first three verses after the first verse of chapter one of Habakkuk give us

the words of the prophet and show us his spirit, his soul, as he was greatly disturbed at the condition he saw around about him in ancient Judah. In chapter 1 verses 2 to 4, he asks, "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? 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. Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted." Habakkuk saw the evil and the wickedness all around him in the land of Judah and his soul was burdened and he cried unto the Lord for an answer to the situation.

Certainly Habakkuk expresses a feeling that must be in the heart of every Christian today as he looks upon our country. Israel was formed because God called the people out in order to show forth His message. The United States was established by those who came here in order to establish homes in a place where they would be free from the control of the wicked, where they would be able to establish a community that would live in accordance with God's law and would be a lighthouse to the world. I believe that over eighty percent of all the money that has been given today for missions comes from the United States and probably a similar percentage of the missionaries that go off to foreign lands comes from the United States. The United States has been through its history a lighthouse, it has been a center from which the word of God has gone out. It has been an area of which the word of God has been as central in its life as in any country in the world, even more so than in almost any other.

There was a great civil war in this country a century ago. And a German constitutional historian writing on the constitutional history of the United States said that civil wars are usually the most destructive of all wars, they're the most violent and treacherous. But he said that this was the only civil war he knew of in history in which both sides constantly proclaimed their desire to follow international law in their carrying on of the war to avoid doing any more damage to civilians that could possibly be avoided. He said that both sides constantly declared that if they could be shown from Scripture that they were wrong, that they would immediately give in to the other side.

Now we're not here to judge the sincerity of any individuals, but the fact that many would speak this way shows that many, at least of their people, felt that way. The United States has been a great lighthouse, but today it is losing much of its light.

In my earliest days of my teaching I lived in the heart of Philadelphia and I used to go out every evening. I was not married at the time. I used to go out every night and walk up and down the streets. I walked through all the parks of central Philadelphia getting my exercise there, and become familiar with all the various streets. I happened to mention that to someone the other day and he said you wouldn't dare do that today. He said you'd be sure to be knocked over, mugged, or injured if you were to do that today in any of our large cities. Every year in recent years we find that the amount of violence in our country is tremendously increasing.

I believe in the last few years there has been a greater production of evangelical literature than for many, many years. There are more Bible conferences today, there is perhaps a wider extension of preaching of the word than there has been most times in the last 50 years. But if you take the group who hear the Scripture today in our country and the group who are trying to stand for it and compare it with the nation as a whole in contrast with the great increase of violence and great increase of pornography the decisions of the Supreme Court that tear down the stand of our nation for what is right and what is true, we are on a very very bad track.

Surely these should express the attitude of any of us, these words of Habakkuk "Lord how long shall I cry out about violence? Why do you let me see this iniquity and cause me to behold these youths as the law is slacked, the wicked encompasses above the righteous and therefore a wrong judgment proceeds?" Well Habakkuk gave a cry to God in this situation. It bothered his soul and God gave him a specific answer.

We find the Lord's answer contained in the next few verses. In chapter 1 verse 5 the Lord responds, "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." Something is going to happen you will hardly be able to believe. You've seen this great Assyrian oppression that has been going out and conquering nation after nation, but the

Assyrian power is just bottomless. And you think there is going to be a period of peace and a period of freedom from a nation such as the Assyrians. There is another power coming. There is going to be one that gives the death blow to the Assyrian Empire and it is not going to stop there. It is going to go on as strongly as the Assyrians ever did and be a terrible menace to all of you.

He says something you wouldn't believe. In verse 6 he says, "I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own." The Chaldean or Babylonian people were from the extreme south of Mesopotamia, who had taken over the city of Babylon say 50 years before Habakkuk wrote. They were now extending their power and their influence and helping to overthrow the Assyrian empire, he says these Chaldeans or Babylonians aren't going to stop with that. He says they are going to go on, God is going to use them as his instrument. "I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people. They are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk." Then verse 9, "They all come bent on violence." Verses 10 and 11, "They mock kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities... they will impute this power to their gods."

Well did Habakkuk feel very happy now with God's answer? He's received God's answer to his questions on injustice. Here is the all the violence of my people, here is the way they have turned away from God, well God's going to bring in the Chaldeans. And they are going to overthrow the nation and take them into captivity. They are going to put an end to all this wickedness of the people of Judah. Will that make Habakkuk happy? Habakkuk knew there was wickedness among his people, but he knew that as compared with the nations around them, they were paragons of virtue while the Babylonians were worse than Judah ever was.

Archeology has shown us that though there was wickedness in Judah, its moral standards were far higher than any other nation of antiquity. They had God's law, there were many of them who were trying to stand by that law, trying to follow God's word

looking to the sacrifices as teaching them how they should be saved through all eternity. Great prophets had spoken to them and given them God's message and many people had heard these prophets. The proportion of those that were true to the God in the land may have been much greater than the proportion in our country today. And here he says these terrible people, the Chaldeans, these wicked, violent people that are going to overthrow them, they are going to destroy Judah, God is going to use them to punish Judah for their sin.

Habakkuk didn't feel happy a bit about God's message. Habakkuk was really disturbed and upset about it. So we find, in the next few verses, that Habakkuk again speaks, starting with verse 12. Now we won't have time to look in detail into these verses, but we just want to touch on the main points of them, but we notice Habakkuk's problem. "O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One," he says, in verse 13 and following, "Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous, that is, the Babylonians? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? You have made men like fish in the sea, like sea creatures that have no ruler. The wicked foe pulls all of them up with hooks, he catches them in his net." The Babylonians were going to carry them off into captivity. Verse 17, "Is he to keep on emptying his net, destroying nations without mercy?" Habakkuk had a problem when he starts, but now he has a worse problem.

We in America, we look at our country and the way it has been a lighthouse for God, and now we see how there are forces gathering around the world, conquering nation after nation, destroying the freedom of country after country, increasing their armaments while we decrease ours. They act in such a way that one wonders how long it will be before they actually reduce us to the condition of bondage, slavery and persecution of Christians, that today exists in more than a third of the world. One wonders if this could actually happen. Well if the Israelites deserved it, we certainly deserve it. Is it going to happen? What is ahead for our nation?

Habakkuk saw the problem and he called out to God in his anguish. And we can't

help seeing the problem today, if you look at Alexander Solzhenitsyn on the condition of the world today. I wonder how many of you have read *The Gulag Archipelago* in which he shows the way in which the Russian people were treated. I wonder if you've read the book, "The Persecutor" also called "Forgive me Natasha" which tells about one who was a Russia KGB officer trying to destroy Christians by being told they were great enemies of the state, and would go in among them and just try to be violent and to disrupt their lives and seize their leadership and destroy their copies of the Bible. Later he escaped and was converted to Christianity. The condition of sending Cuban troops into Angola, trying to take over that area, spreading over the world while we are decreasing our means of protecting ourselves. What is ahead? We should cry out like Habakkuk. Is the Lord going to allow them to destroy those that are more righteous than they are?

Well Habakkuk wanted to know what to think. He did the right thing in chapter 2. He said, "I will stand on 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" because as Habakkuk went out and told about this terrible thing that's going to happen, the people reproved him, they probably said "What are you saying? What a crazy thing that our God would allow us to be taken over by violence, by these Chaldeans. What an awful thing." He asks, "what shall I say when I am reproved?"

In verse 2 of chapter 2 the Lord answered and said, "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets." This word "make it plain" occurs only three times in the Old Testament. It is used when Moses wrote the Law of God on the stones so that those who come by would be able to see it all that was written there, firmly placed there, clearly, that it would be obvious for them. It is like "Put up a great big sign!" "Make it plain," he says, "that he may run who reads it. That the one who knows what God says can proceed to direct his life and his attitude in accordance with God's guidance."

Now what is the answer? The answer we find is in chapter 2 here and its main emphases, we find stressed in three particular verses. The first of these is in chapter 2 verses 3 and 4, "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.

See, he is puffed up; his [that is the Babylonians] desires are not upright--but the just will live by faith.” That is the first of the three verses giving an answer in this chapter, the fourteenth goes with it: “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” Then verse 20, the last “But the Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth keep silent before Him.”

So the message is that we do not understand all the ways of God, but that we must live by faith. What does this word "faith" mean? The word "faith" in the Hebrew has two meanings. It can mean the faithfulness; the stability, dependability, or it can mean to put one's trust in something. And it means that those who truly believe in God can live by their faith in God, but it is not simply a quality of faith, but it is following God in faithfulness with firm commitment.

“The Lord was in his holy temple”, as the chapter ends, “let all the earth keep silent before him.” As in the book of Job we do not know the full answer. But the best way to know the answer is to come to know God. God is righteous, God is holy, God puts all things together according to his plan. God has a plan for it all, a plan for our lives. Now it may be in his plan that things go well, and that we will receive many good things in our life. If so praise him, let us use it for his glory. It may be in his plan that we face persecution. It may be in his plan that we seem to be failures. It may be in his plan that though we work, toil, and struggle to serve him we seem to accomplish nothing, but if that is his plan for an individual, so long as that individual is faithful, let him rejoice in God’s dependability. Let him know that the one that has faith in Jesus Christ, can know that God is working all things together for his purposes, and in accordance with his will.

God gives us just a little glimpse of the future here in this fourteenth verse where he says “The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” This verse is found almost verbatim in Isaiah 11:9 where it tells about that time when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and a little child shall lead them, that time when all violence will be removed from this earth and our Lord Jesus Christ will rule this earth and reestablish Edenic conditions. We can look forward to it and know that God will accomplish his purpose though our individual part in that purpose we may not know, but

God knows. The actual future of our nation, we may not know, but God knows. God has his plan and his plan is good. As the second chapter ends, “The Lord is in his holy temple, let the earth keep silent before Him.”

Now the verses between 1 and 14 are dealing with the Chaldeans and showing that God is going to punish the Chaldeans, you don't need to worry about the Chaldeans destroying him that is a greater sinner than they are, God will work justly with them too. But now he is going to work with you. In the latter part from verses 14 to 20 goes back to God's judgment on the Israelites and takes up individual sins and shows the wickedness of alcoholism, the wickedness of violence and idolatry, the wickedness of injustices that were developing in that land as they are in ours.

Then the third chapter is the prayer of Habakkuk. A great prayer in which he praises the Lord for His goodness and his control, he describes the Lord's coming in glory and power and then has a most marvelous ending summarizing the teaching of the whole book. Starting in chapter 3 verse 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, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”

The message of Habakkuk is the message of faith. A message that is quoted as the determining thing by Paul in Romans 1:17, and in Galatians 3:11. A verse that is quoted in Hebrews 10:38, it is the center of our attitude as we endeavor to live our lives. It is to know that He is sovereign. He demands a standard none of us can reach. But He blesses those who are striving to reach the standard and He forgives us through Jesus Christ, if we put our faith and trust in Him.

Let us pray. "Our Father, we thank you. We thank you for Jesus Christ our savior. And we thank you for Habakkuk with his inquiring mind. Habakkuk with his seeing situations and his desire to find the answer. We pray to you Lord God for the way you spoke to Habakkuk and gave him the words that were quoted 3 times in the New Testament as the very summary and heart of the teaching of Christianity that 'the just shall live by faith.' Oh Lord God, help us we pray to know your holy word, but help us

above all to know Jesus Christ who was the center of it from Genesis to Revelation, who is its primary subject. Help us to know you who controls all things in accordance with your good purpose. Help us our Father, not to be filled with pride when we are successful. Help us not to feel sad or humiliated when after doing our best we find that we are accomplishing little. Help us, our God, to know that all things are in your hands. "The Lord is in his holy temple, let all the earth be silent before him." Amen.

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