

Habakkuk

[Presented at the World Mission Seminary Conference on June 10, 1974 in Tsuchiura, Japan]
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While discussing the Minor Prophets with a friend recently, he commented that these men wrote while the world was coming down on their ears. This feeling of calamity and frustration must have been especially strong for men of faith like Habakkuk. There are several reasons for this.

Habakkuk knew the living God. He knew that the living God is a just and righteous person but what Habakkuk saw happening, and what he knew was about to happen just didn't fit the picture. Injustice was running rampant in the land. Men were devouring those more righteous than they. Josiah's reform had apparently been quite superficial. It probably met with stubborn opposition from evil men entrenched in positions of power. Thus the innocent, the weak, the helpless continued to suffer at the hands of wicked men. How could the righteous Lord permit such injustice to continue for so long? I think that this in part is Habakkuk's problem as he expresses it in the first chapter of his book.

Habakkuk also knew the promise of God. He knew that his people were God's chosen nation. God had promised that from among these descendants of Abraham the world Savior would be born. The Lord had also promised to give them this land and to make them to be a great nation. Again what Habakkuk sees actually happening doesn't fit the picture. It looks for all the world as if the Lord is not fulfilling the promise that He made to Abraham. Soon the Chaldeans shall overrun Judah. What shall have become of the promises of God then? The actual historical events of Habakkuk's day are contradicting the faithfulness of God. The coming of the Savior, the salvation of mankind hinges upon the continuing existence of this chosen people. How can the Lord permit such things to happen?

The prophet's anguish is acute. It is caused by the things that are happening to him and all about him. His anguish is far-reaching. God's entire plan of salvation is at stake. It is in this kind of anguish, I believe, that Habakkuk brings his complaint to the Lord in the first chapter of his book.

It is significant, however, that Habakkuk turns to the Lord. He does not turn away from God in disgust, or despair, or unbelief because of what is happening. Rather he turns to God for the answer. He brings his complaint to God. The prophet still trusts the living God, but God's way with human history, the things that are happening, are slamming hard against the foundations of his faith.

Do we experience that kind of intense anxiety today? Do we also feel that the world is coming down on our ears?

We rejoice, and rightly so, over the people whom the Lord continues to lead to the Savior through the preaching of the gospel. But if we step back and try to take a world view of the matter, the picture becomes appalling. A recent article in our *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* speaks of the two billion and more inhabitants of this planet who are outside the nominal Christian Church. We know that the word "Nominal" is significant. In what measure is repentance and faith in Jesus unto eternal life still being preached in the organized church today? Where Law and Gospel are being preached, in what measure are fruits of a living faith evident?

The agenda for this conference tells us something about the conditions in the church at large. We feel it is necessary to hear an essay on the true mission statements. We feel we need to

talk about the necessity of precise doctrinal statements. We need to talk about a method of interpretation that cuts the Holy Scripture into shreds and then discards and reassembles according to human thinking. How does this fit with all the wondrous things God has prophesied regarding His New Testament people?

A look at political conditions in our day works similar consternation. Why is the most populous nation in the world closed to missions? Why is the church's position so uncertain in so many countries?

Let me offer another disturbing line of thought which relates particularly to Japan. In the past, the Lord seemed to give His Gospel especially to those people who would be able, financially and politically able, to carry it to others. He gave it to the Europeans who from the Age of Discovery on carried the Gospel to many other parts of the world. He gave it to the North Americans who especially since the World War II have had the means wherewith to carry on massive mission work. Today Japan seems to be destined, to a great degree has already achieved such a leading role in world affairs. Why then is mission work in Japan so slow? It is true that the current phase of mission work in Japan is only about one hundred years old. History, however, seems to be moving so rapidly in our present era. Think of the number of vast empires that we have seen come and go in our lifetime. Or think perhaps of the number of new nations that have emerged in our lifetime. Why then doesn't mission work gain speed too?

Is Christianity really the answer when so much of the world continues to reject this Savior?

If we turn to the matter of human physical suffering, the cause of anguish does not decrease. There is the suffering caused by the cruel injustice of man to man. There are the seemingly senseless wars which continue on almost all continents. Who can begin to comprehend the personal human suffering involved? Then there is the human suffering from the so-called "Natural causes." Think for example, of the widespread starvation along Africa's Sahel.

Do these conditions, these things that are actually happening in our world today, appall us as they should? Are we perhaps callused to human suffering, callused to injustice, callused even to the fact that literally billions of our fellow men remain eternally lost? Is it perhaps true that as long as we and those who are close to us continue to experience the good life, as long as we have the hope also of eternal life for ourselves and our loved ones, we experience no anguish like that of the prophet Habakkuk!

If we are men who love our fellow human men, we can't help but be moved, shocked by what is happening to our fellow human beings. But how can we live with such anxiety? We can not go on endlessly wailing and bemoaning what is happening in our world. We can not and we should not. The answer also is not to be found in an indifferent attitude toward temporal and eternal bemoaning what is happening in our world. The answer is found rather, by turning to the Lord as Habakkuk did.

Let's go back to Habakkuk's day for a moment. He most likely wrote during the time of King Josiah. This puts him in a time of turbulent changes in world affairs – much like our own century. The Assyrian Empire had dominated that part of the world for about a century. It had reached as far south as Thebes, Egypt, some four hundred miles south of the Mediterranean. Now Assyria was on the wane and the Chaldeans were on the rise. In 612 B.C. they wiped the Assyrian capital Nineveh off the face of the earth. The Egyptians tried to challenge the Chaldeans but were defeated decisively at Carchemish in 605. Since Habakkuk speaks of the coming of the Chaldeans as an astonishing thing, he probably is writing before the fall of

Nineveh. At any rate, it is the Chaldeans who shall come down upon Jerusalem and carry her people off captive to Babylon.

What would all this do to the promises of God? His announced plan of salvation was centered in this Jewish nation. It was centered in a Son of that nation. How could this promised plan of salvation be carried out? As Habakkuk writes, what was happening and what was about to happen seemed to contradict everything that God had promised. It is with this complaint that the prophet turns to God for an answer.

God gave his prophet His answer in a vision. He tells Habakkuk that the key to it all is found in the fact that the just shall live by faith. I don't think that those words were very easy to accept in Habakkuk's day. Think of the concrete situation. Injustice is dominant. The poor are suffering. Widows are being cheated. Enemy troops are moving in. Your daughters are being raped. Your sons are carried off into brutal, life-long slavery, and then – to have a prophet tell you, "The just shall live by faith!"

The miracle of it all is that the just do live by faith. Habakkuk not only believed that God would bring just punishment upon the wicked as He had promised, he not only believed that God would carry out His plan of salvation by means of this chosen people, Habakkuk even sings the praises of God in the midst of this calamity. He hopes in God when there is nothing else to hope in which to hope. The prophet rejoices in God, not because of what he sees, but because of what he believes:

“Although the fig-tree does not burgeon,
the vines bear no fruit,
the olive-crop fails,
the orchards yield no food,
the fold is bereft of its flock
and there are no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will exult in the Lord
and rejoice in the God of my deliverance.
The Lord God is my strength,
Who makes my feet nimble as a hind's
and sets me to range the heights.” (3:17-19)

The Apostle Paul and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews unfold the full meaning of Habakkuk's vision for us. Perhaps Hebrews comes closest to the same conditions as at Habakkuk's time. (Hebrews 10:38) The letter was written to people who had suffered much for their faith. They had been abused and tormented. They had suffered much for the faith. They had suffered loss of their possessions. How could such things happen? Why should such things happen to people who had become children of the living God? The writer urges them to hold fast to their hope in Christ because the just shall live by faith. By faith God shall certainly bring them to life eternal.

Paul takes up this same verse and makes it what might be considered the theme of his letter to the Romans. (Romans 1:17) It is by faith and faith alone, by faith in Jesus that the sinner can be justified and receive life eternal with God. In his letter to the Galatians Paul sets this passage in contrast to salvation by works. (Galatians 3:11) The law damns anyone who does not keep it perfectly, but the just shall live by faith.

Where does all of this leave you and me today? I think we find ourselves standing very much where Habakkuk stood. Amidst all this calamity, amidst all these actual experiences which seem to not only contradict God's justice, but seem even to spell defeat and failure for his gracious purposes, with the world crashing down upon our ears, let us stand where Habakkuk stood, looking at the message inscribed on these tablets. "The just shall live by faith."

God has redeemed all mankind through Jesus Christ. He is even now gathering all things in heaven and on earth together in one in Him. There is life eternal for us, for all, through faith in this Jesus. We can not see all this now, but it will come. The Lord's day, the final Lord's day will come. It will not fail. (Habakkuk 2:3) In the meantime, we need to proclaim that faith, hold fast to that faith - faith in Christ, faith by which we mortal men can live eternally.

If we hold fast to his faith, we shall not be indifferent to human need both temporal and eternal. The suffering of our fellow men will continue to fill us with anguish. If we hold fast to this faith, we shall not be able to explain God's ways in a manner that satisfies human thinking. But if we hold fast to this faith in the Savior, the Lord will be our strength and make our feet nimble. Yes, we and all those who share this faith in the Savior shall have life eternal with Him, for the just do live by faith.