

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

[NCTM study]

Rostrevor Baptist Church; Second Term 2004

John D. Calvert

STUDY ONE. Reading: Habakkuk 1: 1-11

Introduction: A significant volume in the twelve Minor Prophets. Very little known about him and his name can imply ‘to embrace or wrestle.’ The prophet clung to God through bewildering situations when wrestling with what he sees and what he believes. He lived in the southern kingdom of Judah during the latter part of the 7th century B.C., a time when the corruption of God’s people was very evident. He was a contemporary of Jeremiah and Nahum and his book is in poetry, with the suggested time of his ministry; 1: 6. Things in the nation are degenerating instead of improving and world events are disintegrating with the approach of a pagan enemy from the north.

The book is a record of the prophet’s conversation with the eternal God rather than a summary of his preaching. The context of his message comes from a dialogue he has with God as to how much longer injustice and violence will succeed in the land. God’s reply is not satisfactory for the prophet nor the people, for God will use the Chaldeans (Babylonians) as His instrument of judgment on the injustice and violence in Judah. So the **key question** is how a good and holy God can use an evil and pagan nation to judge and punish His own people? Why does God reward the wicked and punish the righteous? God’s answer is strange for the foreign nation will itself be judged after its role is complete. Meanwhile a righteous remnant will survive in Judah through steadfast faith in the Lord.

We continually face the temptation of success theology and the use of techniques with prayer as a blessing for our plans. We can believe that injustice and violence will be dealt with but we question when the means used is more corrupt than the one punished. This book does not resolve the apparent contradictions of faith but direction in faith is presented. Note though that faith is never apart from God, it is trust in the Lord. The danger of having faith in faith!

The Book of Habakkuk

Like many of the other prophets, Habakkuk's era was one of violence, injustice and idolatry. The Law was paralysed and godly efforts were nullified. Judicial decisions were perverted and the legal system failed, verses 1-4. For a long time the prophet had cried to God, verse 2. But there was no relief. Had God forgotten that mercy and truth were to dwell together in the land? Why must the righteous suffer and the wicked flourish; cf. Jeremiah 12: 1-4.

1] God works through people and nations to carry out His purposes and ultimately all evil will be judged.

2] God is sovereign over people and nations but He does not fit easily into our mindset or understanding. Steadfast faith through the darkness signifies we are never alone, but satisfactory explanations may never be to our liking.

3] Trust in the Lord who cannot be manipulated but who is secure is seen in 1: 12 & 13 and the significance of worship in 3: 17-18.

The book is about the purposes of God and the realisation of His will for the world. The God who promised Abraham in terms of Genesis 12: 1-3 has not changed.

There is tendency to focus on personal salvation and selfish occupation rather than on the people of God. My prayers, my needs, my desires; for God's glory of course! So should God answer our prayers in the way we think He should, and according to our requests? Essentially, Habakkuk is about the providence of God and primarily concerned with God keeping His promises to His chosen people Israel, and through them to humankind. It is a book emphasising faith for faithful people of whatever age who are in the period between redemption and the eschaton; 2: 4 & 14.

When the Lord answers the Prophet in verses 5 & 6 there is no response as to 'why'. The first word is *Look*. God says, *look at the nations and watch – and be utterly amazed*. The prophet is to look beyond his 'back yard' and realise that what is happening is not an accident in history but the action of God. God does not tell him the reason for the delay, but notice the double *I am*, for the Lord is not idle. He is the Lord of justice and grace. This is not just the problem of Judah but the problem of history, and history has a habit of repeating itself.

The Book of Habakkuk

God allows His people to sink to the depths so they might learn to depend entirely on Him; verse 5b, *you would not believe even if you were told*. Habakkuk's understanding is too limited.

John Newton wrote a poem describing his cry for a deeper knowledge of God. Instead of a wonderful vision and showers of blessings that he expected, he experienced months when he seemed abandoned to Satan and tempted beyond his comprehension. He finally realised this was God's way of answering his prayer. God allowed him to go into the depths with the loss of all his supports so he would depend entirely on the Lord. God doesn't give us strength or things or fuzzies, He is everything and He is all, He is our strength.

What if a modern Chaldean army endangers or overwhelms us? God at times answers our prayers by allowing events to become worse before they improve. Note, John 11: 37 & 4.

In verses 6 & 7 the terrifying details are explained, cf. Jeremiah 1: 14-16. The Chaldeans are God's instrument to bring His people to repentance. The speed with which the Chaldeans became the ruling world power was almost unbelievable as they defeated the Assyrians and crushed Egypt. Distance is no obstacle to them and verses 8-11 depicts their armies overrunning the country, looting, raping, killing, spreading panic.

Notice again, **verse 5**. The prophets of God proclaimed His truth but the people preferred to listen to the false prophets who told them the good news that they wanted to hear. Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Amos and other prophets were unpopular because they spoke the truth of God's word. The response was a denial that God would do anything like using pagans to carry out His plan and certainly not against His own covenant people. However, this is the lesson of history and as old as the flood, *my spirit shall not always contend with man* (Genesis 6: 3).

Ancient people scoffed then and it was similar with Sodom and Gomorrah. The prophets were regarded as alarmists and by the time people realised the truth it was too late. Paul used history in Acts 13: 40 & 41 and referred to Habakkuk 1: 5. Israel had not recognised her Messiah, had crucified him and then refused to believe the good news. Rather than the Assyrians or Chaldeans it was the Romans who occupied Israel and after Paul's death the Roman legions came in 70 AD and destroyed Jerusalem. The Jews were cast out among the nations until the Six-Day War in 1967. However, there are no easy or simplistic answers, Luke 13: 1-5.

The Book of Habakkuk

God is the Lord of history and let us be aware that the prophet himself did not understand what God was doing, verse 5. There are no accidents and no fatalism in God's working, for in His purposes He knows the end from the beginning and acts accordingly, Hebrews 1: 1 & Galatians 4: 4 & 5.

God is King of His kingdom and this is what we are to seek while living in our portion of history, Matthew 6: 33 & Revelation 11: 15. Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God and everything that occurs in the world is connected to His kingdom; Ephesians 1: 9 & 10.

The prophet's dilemma confronts faithful people in every age; God seems not to answer prayer for peace and the healing of society. Evil rather than good, war instead of peace, hatred rather than reconciliation as if God were absent. God's answers do not satisfy the prophet and he is even more perplexed as verse 12 states.

So the question for us includes; 'what is God teaching me through the prophet concerning my own situation? What lessons do I need to learn? In what ways should I make correction in my own thinking and attitude and lifestyle? This emphasis rather than giving in to bewilderment and doubting the holy love and justice of the Father.

The puzzles do not fade away after our sleep or holiday concludes, for God is not changeable like the weather. Nor are we to shrug our shoulders and cave in to despair or give in to simplistic responses. Our response in faith is the impact of The Lord's Prayer.

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

[NCTM study]

Rostrevor Baptist Church; Second Term 2004

John D. Calvert

STUDY TWO. Reading: Habakkuk 1: 12-17

In the last study we mentioned several times that God is the Lord of history, that He continues to work out His purposes and that history links with the kingdom or rule of God. We also noted the prophet's prayer in verse 2 and God's answer in verse 5 that left Habakkuk astonished and bewildered by God's solution. Basically the covenant people of Judah were not living in the authority of God's word and the prophet anguishes with God about what is and is not happening. The prophet would naturally have his own ideas of how God should respond, but God's reply about the coming action, which He will initiate, is vastly different from the prophet's opinions.

There are always dangers confronting the people of God and like those of old we can easily make the mistake of entering into political or business alliances to keep back the very judgment that God has ordained to make us rely on Him. The church is not to view events through purely political or business glasses, but interpret events in the light of God's word. This does not deny the fact of politics nor suggest that there is not requirement for business like administration. Sadly, we can 'build a church' by using market research and techniques, business methods, and pressure tactics, but it is not the church of God's covenant people.

Verse 12 introduces the prophet's second complaint to God for he is harassed by doubts and disturbed by God's answer to his first complaint. His understanding and theology is in some turmoil for the Lord's coming judgment is a heart-stopping blow to the prophet. That Jehovah would even think of using a cruel pagan nation seemed to cut across the idea of God's own covenant with His people. The covenant origins went back to the patriarchs; Exodus 3: 6-8, 14 & 17 and 6: 3 & 4. Note Genesis 18: 18 & 19 and 28: 15, plus the significance of Genesis 3: 15. *We shall not die?* is a question rather than a statement.

The deportation of the ten tribes from the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians had been an appalling calamity. Their southern

The Book of Habakkuk

relatives did not learn from what happened and now it was their turn. God's announcement seemed like a Supreme Court sentence with no right of appeal. *We shall not die?* Or that can't be right can it? That would contradict your own revelation and character, so he begins to remonstrate with the Lord, 12a; *O Lord, are you not from everlasting?* God, would you permit your enemies to foil your eternal plan of salvation?

My God, my Holy One... The gods of the Chaldeans focus on their own ability, but Judah's God is Jehovah, the Holy One. Isaiah 57: 15 & Exodus 15: 11. Holiness is God's moral excellence, the divine attribute referred to in the Old Testament more than all the other attributes of God put together. Jehovah is holy, His is the glory and He commands us to be holy; Leviticus 19: 2 cf. 1 Peter 1: 16. He cannot and will not compromise with sin in any form, Psalm 24: 3 & 4. Holiness is not only a command for it arises out of relationship with God who is holy. Hebrews 12: 10 ... *God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness.* We are made holy through the cross and resurrection and the work of grace.

In the Lord's Prayer we say, *Hallowed (holy) be your name*, but our acknowledgment of God's holiness is not just by saying words but by the expression of our hearts, the practical overflow of our lives. God is holy, He has elected us to holiness and brought us into His holiness; Isaiah 6.

Verse 13 depicts God the Holy One on one side, and on the other is the treacherous Chaldean, *destroying nations without mercy*; **verse 17**. In **verse 14** the prophet sees that just as fish and other sea creatures are caught for food, so the Chaldeans catch and devour men and nations. The fish in the sea have no ruler and the nation has no leadership, for God has become irrelevant to the legal, political and spiritual life of the people.

In **verses 15 & 16** the hooks, net and dragnet are three symbols of the Chaldean war machine and every device for defeating, capturing, deporting, destroying are depicted. The Chaldeans disregard any thought of the One true God, Yahweh (Jehovah), and attribute their success to strategy, military ability and bravery. Notice they conduct sacrifices and burn incense to deify their own ability. They live in luxury and over indulge in food for gluttony was their enjoyment.

Verse 17 raises the continuing question; why? How easy is it to become swollen with self-satisfaction and pride? We can be snared by the subtlety of worshipping the symbols of our apparent success, and blinded and deafened by our prosperity. Only the cleansing of the cross brings us to

The Book of Habakkuk

true worship and honest perspective. Despite what happens in business and the economy we live in a prosperous nation and can be urged to give priority to the symbols of our own achievements and these may become our objects of worship. We can also worship, worship!

Remember the story of the frog placed in a container of water that is slowly heated. All the frog has to do is jump out but it does not acknowledge its environment and its danger. The frog's physiological system is such that it does not detect the increasing heat. When the water boils the frog dies.

We too can be caught in increasing affluence and the manipulation of humanism and not heed the danger, particularly if it is given a religious or Christian cloak. The theological or church 'in thing' or 'flavour of the month' idea can be so attractive with religious peer pressure. Calvin said **'The church cannot be governed in any other way than by the Word'**.

The real issue is not in the difficulty or the circumstances, but in God's way of facing the difficulty. It is easy to panic and jump to the wrong conclusion when we are perplexed, and fatal to become immersed in our problems and talk them over with every ear we can catch. We need to stop and think and realise that the Lord is still working. -- There is the trap of parallax error, illustrated in old petrol pumps!!

Is there a Biblical answer? **Verse 12** also presents the picture of the prophet reminding himself of the character and nature of God as Holy and Everlasting, even though he was having difficulty working out the events around him, and questioning God. While God works in time and in history, He, as God, is outside time and history and not pressured by human manipulations. He has preceded history and initiated creation. He has entered time and history as the God-Man and conquered sin and death as our representative and substitute. He reigns as the Everlasting Lord and King.

In the same verse the prophet, despite his questions, refers to God as *my Holy One*. He did not understand what was happening but this was all he had to cling too. There are so many issues in our society that have no answer except; *shall not the judge of all the earth do right?* (Genesis 18: 25) Habakkuk recalls that God is the God of covenant, who has called His people into eternal relationship with Himself, and who is always faithful. This covenant springs from His own loving kindness and mercy (grace), I will be their God and they will be my people. This same call comes to us

The Book of Habakkuk

through the cross and resurrection, for it was in that act that the covenant embraced all nationality, culture and colour.

However, in **verse 13** the questions continue but there is no adequate answer. So rather than confine our questions and seek answers from human agencies and build some philosophy of life through the influence of others, we must talk to our Father and, by faith, leave the unsolved problems with Him. We return to **verses 5 and 12** and acknowledge that a Holy God will never do or want us to do anything that is contrary to His nature. We may not understand but our hope is ever in the Lord.

P.T. Forsyth, 'The soul of divine fatherhood is forgiveness by holiness ... It is a matter of grace meeting sin by sacrifice to holiness, more even than of love meeting need by service to man'. (*God the Holy Father*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1957, p 5.)

Note, we are not to seek holiness, but seek the Lord.

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

[NCTM study]

Rostrevor Baptist Church; Second Term 2004

John D. Calvert

STUDY THREE. Reading: Habakkuk 2: 1-5

Habakkuk now waits for God to answer his perplexities, but when God responds He does not give a straightforward response, but indicates that the answer is coming. There is no human wisdom that can discover the ways of God; Ecclesiastes 3: 11, Job 11: 7, 1 Corinthians 1: 21. If we isolate our thinking and searching to the events of nature or some lesson from history for proof of God's workings, and neglect the interpretation of Scriptures, we will despair of God's interest or give way to cynicism; Isaiah 40: 25-31, 2 Peter 2: 3 & 4, Jeremiah 17: 15, Zephaniah 1: 12 & 13. The true revealer of God is the word of God, John 17: 25 & 26.

As long ... as we judge according to our own perceptions, we walk on the earth; and while we do so, many clouds arise, and Satan scatters ashes in our eyes, and wholly darkens our judgment, and thus it happens, that we lie down altogether confounded. It is hence wholly necessary ... that we should tread our reason under foot, and come nigh to God himself ... let the word of God become our ladder ... (Calvin, 1V, 59).

The prophet is the one who takes the word of God to his people and he must turn to God and wait for the word and its interpretation. Prophets do not have independent wisdom of their own, Jeremiah 42: 5-7. Our situation is no different for we too are dependent upon the word in the Scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation the whole of the Scriptures (Bible) is ours and we must read and saturate ourselves in the truth revealed by the Holy Spirit. We can enter into all God's promises for they are all ours in Christ.

The delay in God's response may evoke impatience, but in God's time the prophet is assured that the answer will come. The delay will be a trial to Habakkuk, but he cannot hurry God and he will come to realise that God answers in His time and brings the fulfilment of His answer in His own time.

The lessons for us are the same as for the prophet for the Father is always at work (John 5: 17) and we cannot dictate for Him to adopt our agendas.

The Book of Habakkuk

We are to hold on to the eternal God, not to circumstances, even in the darkness. Yet we still must not imagine we can twist His arm because of our need. Jesus did His Father's will, He did not minister to people's needs or accept their programs, John 8: 28 & 29.

When the answer does arrive the prophet is told to write down the substance of the message on tablets so that the message is preserved and can be read to future generations. The vision will be pertinent not only to the prophet and his immediate questions, but to the questions God's chosen people will ask in the future times of living in an evil world. An expression that may help us is 'attitude'. There are some people who prefer to serve God in an advisory capacity. In contrast the prophet, as he waits on the Lord, is confronted with the principle that the attitude of faith means belief.

The prophet is now to receive the Lord's response and despite being bewildered, he listens; **verse 1**. The watchtower and ramparts were significant in ancient walled cities, but this is an illustration of his attention to God's response. They are symbolic for this is not referring to the prophet as a watchman for his people, Ezekiel 3: 17. The event happens in his heart and life, *I will look to SEE what He will say to me, and WHAT ANSWER I AM TO GIVE to this complaint*. Note, *I will stand ... station myself ... I will look ...* Here is attitude in action for when we take our problems to the Lord and leave them with Him we are to cease to worry about them. We have left them with Him; but this is never easy; 1 Peter 5: 6-11. Some prefer to wallow in self-pity and refer to their prayer life as a focus on themselves and that is false piety. Worry is sin, so be encouraged by Philippians 4: 6 & 7.

The attitude of expectant faith in prayer also looks for answers, and is trusting and perceptive enough to know that the answer may be very different to what we expect. The response may come as we read the Scriptures, through a sermon or study or apparent circumstances, or ...? We cannot stipulate our RSVP. If we give way to negative or critical attitudes or the so-called advice of friends, we may miss God's reply, James 1: 22-25. We have built in mental filters that may not hear or can alter what we hear into a more convenient or expected suggestion; 2 Peter 1: 20 - 2: 3.

So while the prophet could not understand God's actions he still looked for answers. We are not asked to understand, but to believe. The Lord never calls us to a task without opening the door, but we may have to push the door and we need to walk through. God does not provide

The Book of Habakkuk

celestial magic carpets. The best measure of a spiritual life is not the ecstasies but obedience to what we are told.

Verses 2 & 3 reveal God's reply, ... *the revelation awaits an appointed time ... All such time is fixed by the Lord, never by humans; Galatians 4: 2, and His Lordship encompasses all time; Psalm 90 & Ezekiel 12: 21-28. It is a mistake to measure God by our scale of time or action. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay.* The time hastens, puffs or pants towards its end as if God's fulfilment were personified like a runner straining for the finishing line. That which seemed delayed by our reckoning has not been impeded for God's purposes cannot be thwarted; Isaiah 55: 10 & 11. The Babylonian conquest of Judah seems to reverse what God is about, but they are integral parts of God's actions and not reversals. Romans 9: 22-24 and 2 Peter 3: 9; *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.*

It is all to do with God's kingdom and his rule for earth, and while we are wearied and dismayed and cry, *How long, O Lord?*, our assurance is in Him and written on placards so all can see if they have eyes to see. This is not passive resignation or stoic acceptance but the action of faith. Note, *but the righteous will live by his faith.* This does not signify keeping your chin up or maintaining rigid control of our emotions, but confident trust. Biblical faith is response to God and His saving truth, it has an object and is never some jump in the dark with a question mark!

*Faith ... is a recognition in the facts put forward of God's answer to one's otherwise hopeless need; a realisation that the word of the gospel is God's personal address, and Christ's personal invitation; to oneself the hearer; a reliant outgoing of the soul in trust and confidence towards the living God and His living Son. (J.I. Packer, *God's Words*, IVP, 1981, p 130)*

God's moment is determined by Him, never by world events apart from Him. God, through Moses, prophesied the flood in the O.T., but 120 years passed and nothing seemed more unlikely. The people laughed at Noah, but at the appointed time the deluge began and God shut the door of the ark, not Noah. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was a pre-determined moment, and when the time came, God acted. In the life of Abraham is the promise that his descendants would be afflicted for 400 years. In Exodus 12 we discover that they were in Egypt for some 430 years, but when God's time was right He delivered His people through the Passover. Note, 2 Corinthians 4: 16-18.

The Book of Habakkuk

The expression, *the righteous will live by his faith* or *faithfulness* is the literal word, refers to integrity of relationship between a person and God and this is central to the meaning of our existence. The life of faith does not mean reason and knowledge are tossed aside, but it does mean continuing belief in the Lord even if reason and knowledge are exhausted. Righteousness and faith are linked together particularly in the New Testament, by Paul in Romans 1: 17 and Galatians 3: 11, and by the author of Hebrews in 10: 38. Through Martin Luther's writing and preaching this truth became one of the key themes of the Protestant Reformation.

The faith which saves is not one single act done and ended on a certain day: it is an act continued and persevered in throughout the entire life of man. The just not only commences to live by his faith, but he continues to live by his faith: he does not begin in the spirit and end in the flesh, nor go so far by grace, and the rest of the way by works of the law ... Faith is essential all along; every day and all the day, in all things. Our natural life begins by breathing, and it must be continued by breathing; what the breath is to the body, that is faith to the soul (Spurgeon, *A Luther Sermon at the Tabernacle*, p 715).

Paul's emphasis of righteousness and faith in Romans 1: 17 is in the context of verses 14-23. He is eager to preach to the Gentiles (Greeks) because Christ has offered salvation (life) to all through the cross and resurrection. The Jews have no privilege of birth for God's life is not given as a reward for our apparent status, nationality, religion, etc. In the same way in Galatians 3: 11, Paul declares that life is not given through the works of the law. Any reliance on performing works, religious works, of the law for our salvation leads us further from God. Apart from salvation by grace through faith, we live under His wrath and God gives us over to the chaos we have made for ourselves; Jeremiah 2: 13; John 4: 13 & 14. This New Testament use has an eschatological interpretation for the believer, but also for Habakkuk in his experience, and for his contemporaries, and all the faithful who live in the meantime.

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

[NCTM study]

Rostrevor Baptist Church; Second Term 2004

John D. Calvert

STUDY FOUR: Reading: Habakkuk 2: 4-20

We have noted the significance of **verse 4** that is used three times in the New Testament. It is not Judah as a total nation but the righteous who live by faith, and who believe God's vision and promise. The purpose of the approaching destruction by the Babylonians (Chaldeans) is God's judgment on the nation of His own people because of their deliberate sin, their unrighteousness. God's purpose is not to crush them out of existence even though it is severe. His punishment is to correct them and to keep them from continuing in pride, idolatry and falsehood. There are only two attitudes to life on our planet; faith in Christ or lack of faith, which means idolatry.

God is teaching the prophet to see that the key issue is not why He is using the wicked Babylonians to punish His people. The key is to remain faithful and you will live. History can only be understood in terms of God's rule, His kingdom in our world, and His rule in the church. Note, 1: 2, 5, 12a; 2: 4, 14, 20; 3: 18 & 19. Faith in Hebrews 11: 1 emphasises that Scripture teaches on the reality of the objects of faith not on the degree of confidence that we feel about them. So faith is total and complete dependence on God who is utterly trustworthy in all that He says.

*Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress,
Helpless, look to thee for grace.*

Therefore, we do not do what we do in order to be justified for all our works will not accomplish anything. But there are no limits to what we will do for our Lord because of the justification we have received.

In November 1515 Martin Luther, a Roman Catholic monk and Professor of Theology in the University of Wittenberg, began to expound Paul's letter to the Romans to his students. In preparing his lectures he came

The Book of Habakkuk

more and more to appreciate the centrality of Paul's doctrine of being justified by faith.

I longed greatly to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression 'the righteousness of God'. Because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous ... Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy He justifies us by faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors to paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning ... (Luther's Works, Weimar, Vol. 54, p 179ff).

Faith does not destroy or distort reason, it make reason what it ought to be; an understanding of history and the kingdom of God. Faith is linked with righteousness or justification, and it is Paul who writes so much about this doctrine in Romans where he uses the synonyms *reckon (impute) righteousness, forgive (remit) sins*, in Romans 4: 5-8. These phrases do not mean inner transformation, as the Roman church believes, but conferring a legal status and cancelling a legal liability.

Justification is a judgment passed on man, not a work wrought within man: God's gift of a status and a relationship to himself, not of a new heart. Certainly, God does regenerate those whom he justifies, but the two things are not the same (J.I. Packer, *God's Words*, IVP, 1981).

The dialog between the prophet and God is concluded and what follows after **verse 5** is a series of woes or devastating judgments describing the puffed up man who is filled with his own importance and living a life based on confidence in himself. The prophet is engaged in the public proclamation of God's word. The arrogant man in **verse 5**, describing the accumulation of extensive wealth, as in 1: 14-17 refers to the Babylonian Emperor, although the context would have been in the temple setting; **verse 20**. The woes illustrate the contrast with **verse 4**, *the righteous will live by his faithfulness*. Some of his utterances contain answers to his earlier questions, particularly 1: 12 & 13, as to how a holy God could use an unholy nation to punish a less evil people. He knows the answer but the vision has still not arrived.

Observe that the prophet's words are not locked into the Babylonians, for he discusses the general portrayal of those who are mighty, wealthy and proud and shows that true (righteous) living is not possible for persons and nations who focus on themselves. Similar woe oracles are in Isaiah 5: 8-23, (then verses 24 & 25), 10: 1, 28: 1, 30: 1, 31: 1; Amos 5: 18 & 6: 1. People such as are described here are crooked and bent, 2: 4 and *never at rest*, 2: 5. Now, the five woes, each introduced by that word, indicate crime and consequence.

The Book of Habakkuk

1. Verses 6-8; those who plunder will be plundered. The tyrants like thieving moneylenders who steal and exploit and oppress with debts will themselves be oppressed by their debtors. The instrument of judgment will become the object of judgment and God's justice will be done. Such a picture is true to the history of most revolutions on our planet. The interesting depiction here does not say though that this is God's direct act, but the inevitable consequence of the evil that has been perpetrated. Habakkuk sees a moral order in human history that he could not perceive earlier. Now that God's word has come to him he sees that the tyranny of human empires, selfish power brokers and dictators may succeed for a time, but all tyranny contains the seeds of its own destruction.

2. Verses 9-11; ambitious schemes will be repaid by shame. Any person, family, dynasty, government (house) or nation that has obtained power by robbery, deception or oppression, and imagined itself safe and superior from any challenge to its power, has not understood the limits set by God. Psalm 127: 1, *Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain.* The goal of security and the profits of unjust gain are undermined by the means through which it is apparently established. There is no security in the pursuit of exploitation and evil, for such ambition cannot be satisfied by immoral chasing. The prophet's figure of speech *describes the stones of the wall crying out* like witnesses against the corrupt builder, and the *beams of the woodwork echoing* the same condemnation for the building is from *unjust gain*. He is trapped in his own eagerness to enrich himself at the expense of others.

3. Verses 12-14; a city built with iniquity and bloodshed. The extensive building program undertaken by the Babylonians was done at the price of blood from conquered nations. Military might was used to conquer the world of their time, but their goals of world domination were based on evil and nourished in blood. As they build they destabilised their own construction. The word *city* can be metaphorical for an empire. Any attempt by human beings to gain prestige for themselves by public buildings, works, laws, and redevelopment through injustice reveal themselves to be empty attempts that will fall before God's sovereignty. **Verse 13** shows the futility of such behaviour and **verse 14** a wonderful encouragement (Exodus 9: 16, Numbers 14: 21, Isaiah 11: 9).

4. Verses 15-17; shame instead of glory. A military power, mob rule, gang behaviour or individuals who seek to gain admiration (*glory*) by subjecting others to humiliation will find they become the victims, *and filled with shame*; Jeremiah 51: 7-10 & 25: 15 & 16; Psalm 75: 7 & 8. He

The Book of Habakkuk

invites his neighbours to his banquet, offers them friendship and alliances, but at the same time pours wine into them until they lose control. They are stripped of their liberty and independence, become naked puppets scorned by their host. The violence done to other nations is symbolised in verse 17 with the reference to Lebanon's forests used for constructing war machines and buildings, and sadism to animals that are God's creation, land and the inhabitants. Such violence and destruction will return to overwhelm and terrify the perpetrators.

5. Verses 18-19; the idolater deserted by his idol. Their reasoning was so warped that they trusted man made idols that had no response. Such idols, including religious ones, might be attractive and decorated, but void of life, *there is no breath in it*, dead. The tyrants, oppressors, bullies and military powers are let down by their gods. The final woe is pronounced against all who have worshipped false gods. There is a limit set on human wickedness for the Lord is King. Those who imagine that there is no God and Father and think they are their own god are repeating the sin of the Garden of Eden; *you will be like God*. The affairs of humans and nations are always in God's will and purpose despite what seems different.

Verse 20, cf. Psalm 11: 4-7 & Psalm 46. What is vital is the silence of obedience, not the prattle of rebellion. The contrast is not only between the person of faith and the unbeliever; but between the Christian who is obedient and the apparent believer who is in revolt, complaint and bitterness.

One puzzle for us is that the wicked of our world who have made themselves their own gods do not seem to receive their due. They may appear very successful; Psalm 73: 3-14. However, it is not history that proves that Scripture is true but the word of God that illuminates and clarifies history, and that word must be read with the eyes of faith; Psalm 73: 16-20 & 24-28.

THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

[NCTM study]

Rostrevor Baptist Church; Second Term 2004

John D. Calvert

STUDY FIVE: Reading: Habakkuk 3: 1-19

Visiting the Hampton Court maze and final relief! The prophet had been lost in the maze of what was happening to his nation and God was not providing the answer. Now he comes to see that the Lord was working all the time. Habakkuk is walking beyond circumstances and living in the realm of faith and therefore of God and his purposes, 2: 4. Here is a prayer, also a Psalm, accompanied by music that expressed deep emotion. The word *Selah* occurs three times and although it's meaning is uncertain, it was regarded as a poetic term used in public temple worship. The substance of the Psalm suggests this writing was appropriate for use in worship. There is the promise of 2: 4 and the woes of 2: 6-19, the significance of verse 20 and now the hymn of chapter 3.

Verses 1 & 2: The prophet has heard as in **verse 2**, and the effect of God's word regarding His fearful judgment on the faithless causes the prophet to tremble in awe and terror, **verse 20**. He asks the Lord to put His declared plan into operation, ie. judgment is coming may it come quickly, and prays *in wrath remember mercy*, for both the faithful and the wicked, **verse 2**. In this verse he does not ask that his work continue or his message be heard, but, *renew them, your deeds, in our day*. May your work be done, meaning that the prophet concentrates on the Lord, not on himself or anyone else. *Lord, I have heard of your fame*, and now the prophet turns from thinking of his own reputation and his nation's situation or even the advancing Babylonians and contemplates the holiness and justice of God, **verse 3**.

We easily distort matters when we continue to focus on the problem rather than viewing them in the light of God's action, his justice. In practice we know that problems in our domestic lives do not evaporate and they must be faced and dealt with, often head-on. Ignoring an issue or hoping it will vanish over night does not work. At times we have to live with such matters, knowing that our Lord is not absent.

The Book of Habakkuk

On the other side false piety is obnoxious and unreal but this chapter is not pious nonsense, for we are to have concern for *the Holy One* and *His glory* and *His praise* filling the earth. The Lord does not promise to remove the approaching armies of trouble and destruction for Judah or for us, but He is with us in the furnace and may or may not deliver us; Isaiah 43: 1-3.

The hymn is also a vision and extends to all the nations of the planet, **verse 12**. The hymn/vision/psalm is about God's final reckoning with the wicked and the establishment of his order, his kingdom, and is not just a confirmation of 2: 4 but of **verse 3**. This hymn is also a theophany or appearance of God; Deuteronomy 33: 2, Judges 5: 4 & 5, Psalm 18: 7-15. The message brings us back to the Kingdom of God.

Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill;
God's truth abideth still;
His Kingdom is forever.
(Martin Luther: 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God')

The kingdom is our focus and this should be the proper concern of the church. Worship, teaching, including music and congregational participation is for God's glory, not our comfort zone, nor to attract or soothe or be entertaining.

The prophet could not achieve any goal to hasten or thwart what God was doing, but he continued to look and pray and trust. The delusion sometimes put to us is our action in relieving the oppressed in society, sharing wealth with the poor, nuclear disarmament, being user friendly and making the gospel palatable, non threatening, the latest technology, so as to push back the enemy and usher in the kingdom. Such emphasis may be helpful sometimes for there are ministries we can take up [?], but pride and selfishness tend to become prominent and war against our Creator and King. As believers, in the power of His Holy Spirit, we are to minister according to God's purpose but He sets the agenda. We cannot achieve salvation for others or for society, that is God's prerogative for the kingdom is His. There is never need to panic or give way in distress even though our emotions may be affected. We are to keep trusting in Christ, not in positive thinking, nor in what is apparently obvious [?].

Verses 3-15: The confirmation of the word in 2: 3 will come as the answer to the prophet's prayer and he is granted the vision of God's victory over the earth and the establishment of His kingdom. This is similar in emphasis to Moses looking at the promised land; Deuteronomy

The Book of Habakkuk

34: 1-4. Jeremiah inheriting property as a first fruit of restoration. Jeremiah 32: 1-5 Jeremiah confined, 6-15 the field and the promise, 16-25 Jeremiah's prayer, 26-35 judgement, 16-44 restoration, **verse 38-42** covenant. Note too the believers being directed to the messianic banquet when they sit at the Lord's table; Mark 14: 25, and the three disciples being granted the vision of the resurrected Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration; Mark 9: 2-8. This main part of the psalm reminds of God's other involvements with His people, the experience of God in the Exodus, the giving of the law and wilderness experience of the people. So the passage is an extensive theophany as God appears from the deserts of the south in the awesome picture of a violent thunderstorm; eg. Ezekiel 1. The psalm celebrates in this theophany and the writer uses vivid poetry to describe the Lord's presence and action in the world of nature and nations. So the account is not only heading to conclusion but to climax.

Verses 3-6 picture his might and his enemies fall as if struck by plague and pestilence, **verse 5**. Habakkuk is granted a foresight of God's purpose accomplished and his coming as King over all the earth. He is the one calm figure, standing, as the pause before the storm, the nations trembling before him, mountains and hills crumbling and collapsing before him, *his ways are eternal*; **verse 6**.

Verses 7 & 8: Cushan maybe Cush=Ethiopa, but is synonymous here with Midian, a reminder of past judgment; Numbers 31: 7,8 & 16. Midian was the ancient enemy of God's people and here represents all such enemies of his people. **Verse 8** is a reminder that when the Lord parted the waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14: 15ff) and forty years later, the waters of Jordan (Joshua 3: 14ff), he was not acting in anger against the sea or river. **Verse 8b**, *you rode with your horses and your victorious chariots*, pictures the chariots of salvation.

Verses 9-15 symbolise the final battle with God as the divine Warrior-King coming to conquer the chaos, which is the evil of all nations. The uncovering of his bow in **verse 9** describes the battle-bow with God calling for the elements as part of the judgment against the enemy, **verses 9-12**. The only lights in the darkness are seen in the glint of his arrows and flashing spear.

Verse 12, *In wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations*: is a similar picture to Isaiah 63: 1-6. **Verses 13-15** are a picture of panic for the enemies turn their weapons against their own leaders. Psalm 74: 13 & 14; 89: 9 & 10 link with the portrayal in

The Book of Habakkuk

verse 13 of God crushing the head of the wicked and laying him open from head to foot.

Verses 14 & 15 complete the scene for the chaos of nations is defeated. The wicked who thought to oppose his rule are symbolised as *the sea* and *the great waters*. So the vision is that victory is gained, evil is extinct and the faithful who have trusted the Lord, have inherited the kingdom. In this vision the prophet sees something like an Armageddon picture, Revelation 16-19.

Verses 17-19: The vision fades and the prophet is faced with the present, but he asks no more questions and is not in anguish. Note though that his outward circumstances had not changed from the beginning. Destruction, violence, strife and contention remain, 1: 3. Strong nations still overcome weaker people, 1: 13b. The arrogant rule, 2: 5, the poor suffer, 2: 6 & 7, the enslaved work for nothing, 2: 13, and false gods are still worshipped, 1: 11; 2: 18 & 19. What has changed? The prophet, in his attitude and awareness and demonstration of faith in God for he knows who is at work in the turmoil. He knows what the end will be and sings the magnificent song of **3: 17-19**.

The failure of the fig tree, grapes, olives, fields and flocks, essential provisions for the nation's life, was probably due to the invaders; Jeremiah 5: 17-20. The foe in Jeremiah is not only Babylon, but also the Lord who comes as the Divine Warrior who wrecks restorative judgment on his covenant people, and deals with all evil. In **verse 18** he twice uses the word *Jehovah*. Habakkuk is saying that come what may in terms of injustice and violence in society, foreign invasion and the accompanying desolation, he and all the faithful can and must *rejoice in the Lord*. Trembling feet now skip like a deer for he walks in the heights by faith. Note James 1: 2-4; Romans 8: 37-39.

God's covenant of peace in Christ shall not be removed nor ever fail; Isaiah 54: 10. His redemption is eternal; Hebrews 9: 12-15. Can we live in such truth and affirm faith like Habakkuk and know with certain joy that God is working his purposes and will bring all to completion?

Can we, in an evil and uncertain world, in sickness, sorrow, with enemies, deprivation and death, join in the prophet's song?

Though vine nor fig tree neither
Their wonted fruit shall bear,
Though all the field should wither,
Nor flocks nor herds be there;
Yet God the same abiding,

The Book of Habakkuk

His praise shall tune my voice,
For while in Him confiding
I cannot but rejoice.
(William Cowper [1779] 'Sometimes a Light Surprises')

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his Nazi prison cell during World War 2: 'By good powers wonderfully hidden, we await cheerfully, come what may'.

C.H. Spurgeon preached on this passage and declared:

... We have been assured by people who think they know a great deal about the future that awful times are coming. Be it so; it need not alarm us, for the Lord reigneth. Stay yourself on the Lord ... and you can rejoice in His name. If the worst comes to the worst, our refuge is in God; if the heavens shall fall the God of heaven will stand; when God cannot take care of His people under heaven He will take care of them above the heavens, and there they shall dwell with Him. Therefore, as far as you are concerned, rest; for you shall stand ... at the end of the days
(*'The Middle Passage'*, p. 723).

Prayer became confidence because of the vision. The same God who had acted previously would do so again. Similar to the story of Job where there is no easy answer, the problems are resolved more by vision than rational thinking. Only personal encounter with the living God can enable us to see the vision and the significance of who he is.