

"I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told." Hab. 1:5

1. Prayer at Desperation Point.

When we first meet him in the pages of his book, Habakkuk is a godly prophet, conscientiously praying for Judah at a time when the nation had sunk to its lowest ever point of degradation and sin (Hab 1:2-4). It was probably some time after Josiah and Jeremiah had finished their attempt to bring the nation back to God, and a little less than twenty years or so before Judah was completely overrun by the Babylonians and taken into exile. He was praying for a change in the nation, for a return to righteousness, and he was praying out of deep distress at the godlessness around him. Everywhere he looked he saw violence. It was not sporadic violence but *"abounding"* violence (v.3). This violence was the culmination of many decades of self indulgent living coupled with a gross idolatry, which had encouraged both murderous child sacrifice and widespread promiscuity. The moral awareness in the nation had been dulled almost to extinction. As he prayed, the words *"violence"*, *"strife"*, *"conflict"* *"destruction"* poured out from his lips. He lamented a *"paralysis of the law"* (v4), an era of lawlessness. He was appalled at the perversion of justice, and at the aggressive oppression. *"Why do you make me look at injustice?"* was the cry of his heart. The tenderness of Habakkuk's heart is very evident in his praying; he not only saw injustice but felt it so much that he could scarcely bear the sight of it. He had a deep and genuine perception of what was happening in Judah, and an equally deep desire for things to change. He was a prophet with God's heart.

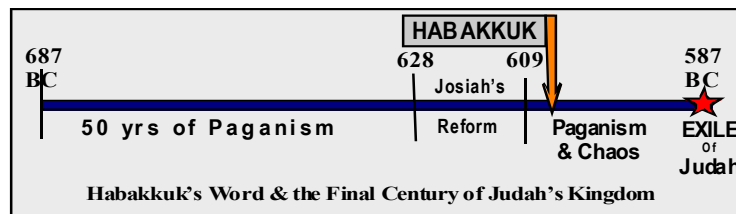
He had obviously been praying like this for some considerable time, probably for years. His distress increased because those prayers seemed to be making no difference to the situation: *"How long, O LORD, must I call for help but you do not listen?"*; *"Why do you go on tolerating wrong"* (v.3) He was desperate to know why God was not punishing evildoers in the nation, and why his prayers were not answered. *"How long, O LORD, must I call for help but you do not listen?"* was a very good question. What was wrong with his prayers? Why wasn't God listening? He was right to question, and even to question God. He was not praying for praying's sake; he was desperately in earnest. He wanted an answer. This is the point he had reached at the beginning of his book. There have been many intercessors praying for our own nation in a similar way, seeking the best but, like Habakkuk, watching things get steadily (even rapidly) worse.

2. The Unthinkable Prospect

In answer to his cry, God began to take Habakkuk's understanding to a new level. He was to learn that God was not going to answer his prayer in the way he wanted and bring about an inner reformation in the nation. God had already provided agents of reform in the persons of the godly King Josiah and the young Jeremiah, but the hearts of people were so hardened that they had refused to be reformed. Something, therefore, much more drastic was needed. The only thing left for God was to purge the nation of its idolatry and godlessness by appalling affliction. Jerusalem would be destroyed, the nation devastated, and the people taken into exile. One day a purged remnant would eventually come back out of the catastrophe. There was no

alternative course.

So God's answer to Habakkuk's question was to inform him of the scourge that was on the way (vv. 5-11): he was going to *"raise up the Babylonians"* to world conquest (v.6), and Judah was going to feel the lash of their cruelty and power. Judah had given itself over to violence, and now it would feel the full fury of a great power *"bent on violence"* (v.9). Habakkuk knew God



had *"appointed them to execute judgement"* and *"ordained them to punish"* (1:12). He knew they would totally devastate the land, and to him it was unthinkable and unacceptable. He struggled over it. God was right when he said to Habakkuk, *"you would not believe even if you were told"*.

The idea of judgement itself would not have been something that took a prophet like Habakkuk by surprise, but the sheer extent and horror of the judgement that was being purposed by God undoubtedly did, for it meant nothing less than the death and destruction of the nation (1:17). This immediately raised a problem for Habakkuk. He seems to have shared the prevailing theological outlook of the time that Judah could never be overcome: Judah had the promises of God that she would last for ever. The people of Judah had seen their northern sister nation, Israel, destroyed and exiled, but Judah itself was different. It had the Temple, and its kings were of the true line of David whom God had promised never to forsake. It was as though God was proposing to go back on his word to his people, and that was unthinkable. So he protested *"we will not die"* (1:12). He simply could not grasp such a catastrophe. It is a classic case of the prophet struggling to accept a message beyond the horizon of his theology and experience.

What really made the whole scenario so unthinkable to Habakkuk, however, was the idea that it was Babylon that would be the agent of Judah's destruction. This was also, to his mind, *"theologically"* impossible (1:12-17), and for a very simple reason: how could Judah, sinful though she may be, be judged by a nation that was much more sinful than Judah? Where was the justice in that? How could God tolerate Babylon's behaviour, let alone use such an instrument, even for judgement. The whole thing was morally repugnant. And Habakkuk strongly complained to God about it.

Habakkuk states his case before God simply and with an obvious note of indignation (vv12-17). He says, *"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous?"*; *"You cannot be silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves!"* (v.13). He reminds God that this Babylon destroyed nations without mercy and with the plunder *"lived in luxury and enjoyed the choicest foods"* (v.17). Having made his point

before God, he set his face to hear God's reply ("*I will stand at my watch and see what he will say to me*" (2:1)). He was determined to argue with God over the issue.

3. Modern Parallels

This stance of Habakkuk has important parallels with our own contemporary outlook. First, though he was deeply impressed by the evil he saw around him and knew God would judge it, he had not accurately perceived just how far matters had gone. He was looking for a solution in some reform from within, not having perceived that this was no longer an option in a nation so degenerate. God's talk of the Babylonians overwhelming Judah was a massive jolt to his thinking. We are very much in the same place, where we are looking for some kind of improvement (and quite rightly working to be salt against the corruption), but blind to the degree that the degeneration has reached, not yet acknowledging that some infinitely stronger purging agent is required. God is seeking to give us the same sort of jolt that Habakkuk received.

"Complacency dulls the perception of possible disaster"

Second, God's word to Habakkuk battered his theology. He believed in judgement – indeed wanted to see it on the ungodly – but he idea of a whole nation coming under a cataclysmic judgement of the kind God was indicating was quite beyond him. That sort of judgement could never come from a God who had made such gracious promises to Judah, certainly not through a heathen nation! That would mean indiscriminate destruction on young, old, weak, strong and the "innocent" and that could not be brought about by God. Many today still battle from this position. For Habakkuk, as for us, it was a very unpleasant truth to swallow.

Third, Habakkuk shared with the people of Judah a complacent presumption that the nation could rely on its past history and privileged position as it faced the future: its position and greatness simply could not crumble just like that! It was ridiculous! Foolish talk! This was a kind of built-in complacency, and a very natural presupposition for a powerful nation (particularly one like our own). But power is always at God's disposal, not at man's. Complacency dulls the perception of possible disaster!

Fourth, Habakkuk had little concept of how imminent the coming disaster was. Babylon was only just appearing on the world stage again, and most people's eyes were still on Assyria. But within 20 yrs Babylon had shot to power, destroyed Assyria and was a world threat. The time before God's judgement was short. And today the time is short.

4. God's Final Answer

God's reply to Habakkuk's question was simple, yet unanswerable: Babylon would be the agent of his judgement, but the day would come when Babylon itself would feel the wrath of God's judgement on its own sins. God was not unjust, simply letting Babylon do what it liked. God made it abundantly clear to Habakkuk that he knew the sins of Babylon. He was not blind to their behaviour. He surveys Babylon's huge evils. It was proud, "*puffed up*" (v.4), "*greedy as the grave*" (v.5), and it "*piled up stolen goods*" (v.6), "*built its cities with bloodshed*" (v.12), "*destroyed lands and cities and everyone in them*" (v.17). It indulged in the most inhuman of behaviour. Habakkuk learned afresh that God's eyes were always on the nations, weighing them, using them, judging them and always acting towards them with righteousness. So the destroyer would be destroyed. God wanted Habakkuk to be quite clear about this, and wanted him to make sure Judah heard of this final outcome for Babylon. Thus right at the start of this answering revelation, (2:2-20), God told Habakkuk to write it down plainly on tablets. It lay in the future ("*the revelation awaits an appointed time*"), and a permanent record must be kept, one which anyone could read. We need to remember that at the point when Habakkuk received this revelation Judah had no idea what Babylon would do to it, much less any idea about what God might do to Babylon. But the day would come when the revelation of Babylon's demise would be food and drink to the hopes of Judah in exile.

5. Accepting the Unthinkable.

It is highly fitting that the last chapter of Habakkuk should record his prayer of response to what he had heard. The first two chapters are an invaluable insight to a prophet's prayerful wrestling with God, trying to grasp new horizons. Now he shows an extraordinary composure as, before God, he accepts the unthinkable.

Taking first the latter part of the third chapter (vv. 16-19) we find that what he has heard has set up a feeling of horror, even fear: "*I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled*" 3:26. He feels precisely the dreadful fear of a people under siege. It is this profound feeling of what was to happen that indicates just how deeply the prophetic word had entered his consciousness. It was not just a matter of words and warning about judgement – it was as if he were already in the midst of it. This is an experience typical of the prophets of that era – they both heard and felt what God was saying, and that put massive weight into their prophesying.

In the light of what he felt for the horrors that lay ahead, the attitude he adopted toward the future is remarkable (vv.17-19): he would wait patiently for the judgement to pass and for calamity to come on Babylon (v.16). Despite the horror of what lay ahead, he was fortified by the thought that it would have an end. It was perhaps as well that he did not realise that it would be seventy years before the slavery of exile would end, and that he would not in fact see it. An ignorance of the future is not always a bad thing, indeed is sometimes a mercy! Supported, however, by the prospect of an end to judgement, he was determined to rejoice in the Lord (v.18), no matter what shortages and devastations might come. God would be his strength and help him to rise "*on the heights*" above it all (v.19). Whether this positive attitude was ever tested in Habakkuk's life we do not know, but it was certainly the right one to adopt to bring composure in the face of such a dark future.

In the earlier part of the third chapter (vv.2-15) he in fact was rejoicing in his God. He surveyed the greatness and majesty of the God of Israel, and the mighty deeds he had done in the past history of the nation. He thought about the power exhibited in the exodus (vv.3-6), and he thought about the deliverances that had been wrought against Israel's enemies (7-13). The coming judgement could not change any of this. His God was still "*in his holy temple*" (2:20), still in control, and had not lost his sovereign power over either nations or nature. He could still rejoice in this God, and plead that though he had to judge his people, he might none the less show his power and "*remember mercy*" (v.2)