Habakkuk - Commentaries by Hamilton Smith

Habakkuk, Habakkuk

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The prophecy of Habakkuk differs from other prophecies inasmuch as it makes no direct appeal to Israel or the nations, nor is any specific date given for its utterance. It is, however, evident that Habakkuk lived in a day when the people of God had utterly failed, with the result that God's hand was upon them in governmental judgment.

The prophecy takes the form of a conversation between the prophet and the Lord, in which the prophet, overwhelmed in spirit by all the failure amongst the people of God, casts his burden upon the Lord, to find that he is not only sustained by the Lord in his sorrow (Psa. 55:22), but is brought to rejoice in the Lord in high places (Hab. 3:18-19).

Habakkuk 1

(Habakkuk 1:1-4) In the opening we learn the prophet's anguish of soul as he confesses to the Lord the low condition of the people of God. His spirit is troubled, not simply by the wickedness of the nations, but on account of the evil amongst the people of God. In the very circle which should have been marked by gentleness and righteousness, peace and concord, he sees violence and corruption, strife and contention.

Moreover he sees that there is no power amongst the people of God to deal with the evil. They fail to use the Word of God, for he has to admit that "the law is powerless, and justice doth never go forth" (ch. 1:4). The wicked are in ascendancy, therefore any judgments at which they arrive are wrong or perverted (N. Trans.).

Furthermore, judging by outward appearances, it would seem as if the Lord did not hear the cry of the godly, nor save His people from their sorrows.

In the presence of all these sorrows the prophet groans in spirit, for God's word permits of a groan, but never a grumble (Rom. 8:22-27). Moreover, the prophet utters his groans to the Lord. Alas! too often there is a tendency with us, as believers, to discuss among ourselves the failures of the people of God in such a spirit of bitterness that the groaning becomes mere grumbling, or complaining as to what God allows in His dealings with His people. Thus complaining words to one another may betray either a lurking spirit of rebellion against God, or an effort to exalt ourselves by belittling others. Good for us, if we escape these snares by pouring out the anguish of our spirits, and the exercises of our souls before the Lord.

(Habakkuk 1:5-10). In these verses we have the answer of the Lord to the cry of this anguished soul. This answer brings before us that which has such a prominent place in the prophecy of Habakkuk—the governmental dealings of God, both with His failing people and an evil world.

God cannot be indifferent to evil. When His people have fallen into a low moral condition, God must either give them up or deal with them in chastening. We live in a day of grace; but grace does not set aside the government of God. As in the days of Habakkuk, the people of God have fallen, and the Church, as a responsible witness for God is ruined; the result being, as the Apostle Peter reminds us, "The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?" (1 Peter 4:17).. This government of God may not take the form of direct intervention, for it is the day of God's long-suffering grace, and Christ is waiting until His enemies be made His footstool. Nevertheless God cannot be indifferent to evil and it remains true that what men sow they reap.

In Habakkuk's day the people of God had fallen, and the nations were marked by violence and corruption. In the midst of these evils the prophet is called to behold God's solemn work of judgment. Behind all that was taking place among men, God was working, and the man of God is to look beyond the works of men to see the work of God (Hab. 1:5).

Today we live in the last days, described by the Apostle Paul when professing Christendom is fast sinking to the level of heathenism, as can be clearly seen by a comparison of 2 Timothy 3:1-5, with Romans 1:21-32. In these perilous times it behooves the believer to behold what God is working for the chastening of His people and in the governmental judgment of the world.

In Habakkuk's day God had raised up the Chaldeans for this work of governmental judgment. Nevertheless, we are told that such was the low condition of God's people that they would not believe the testimony of God to His own work. They refused to see the hand of God behind their enemies who were being used for their chastisement. We know that the Apostle quotes this passage when preaching the gospel at Antioch. There he announced the grace of God that proclaims forgiveness through Christ, and that all that believe are justified from all things. Then immediately he quotes the prophet Habakkuk to warn them against despising the work of grace through unbelief, as their forefathers had despised the work of government through unbelief (Acts 13:41).

In spite, however, of the unbelief of man, the work of God, whether in grace or government, goes on. So, in his day, the prophet is told that God had raised up the Babylonians to carry out His work of government. Little did the Babylonians think that they were raised to the pinnacle of power simply to be an instrument in the hand of God to chastise His people and restrain the evils of the nations. Yet so it was in the prophet's day, and so it has been again and again, in the history of the world, when ruthless tyrants have been allowed for a time to pursue their career of aggression over surrounding nations.

This nation of the Chaldeans is described as a bitter and impetuous nation, marked by cruelty and violence. With aggressive energy they marched through the earth to possess dwelling-places that were not theirs. They inspired terror and dread by their acts of frightfulness, in which they were a law to themselves, having no respect for the customs of the nations. Having sunk below the level of natural men, wild and

ferocious animals are used as figures to set forth the inhuman ferocity with which they would prey upon the nations. For a time they would carry all before them; kings and princes would be set aside, and “every stronghold” (ch. 1:10) overturned.

(Habakkuk 1:11). Then, at the height of their conquering career, their mind would change, and, not content with the ruthless destruction of men they would pass on to offend against God. Entirely failing to see that they were only instruments in the hand of God, and puffed up by their own successes, they would reject the true God and set up a god of their own devising, and worship their own power. So we know it came to pass, when Nebuchadnezzar said, “Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom by the might of my power, and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan. 4:30). He had to learn, as every other tyrant in the course of history has had to learn, that the God who had raised him up to deal with offenders, will also put him down when he offends against the true God by claiming divine honors for himself.

The prophet has poured out his complaint before the Lord (Hab. 1:2-4); and the Lord has met the anguish of his soul by assuring him that behind the “terrible and dreadful” (ch. 1:7) cruelty of the enemy against God’s people and the nations, God, Himself, was working a work in governmental chastening (Hab. 1:5-11).

In the verses that follow (Hab. 1:11-17), we hear the prophet again speaking to the Lord; not as before, to pour out the anguish of his soul because of the low condition of the people of God, but to appeal to God because of the wickedness of those who had been allowed to chasten the people of God. The Lord’s closing words clearly intimated that the wicked nation that had been allowed to overrun the lands of others would end in setting aside the true God and making a false god of their own power.

(Habakkuk 1:12). At once the prophet seizes upon this blasphemy to appeal to God for the judgment of this wicked nation. They may deny the true God, but, asks the prophet, “Art Thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, mine Holy One?” (ch. 1:12). Can God, in consistency with His own glory and holiness, be indifferent to the wickedness of those who defy Him by arrogating to themselves divine powers? Impossible! The prophet bows to what the Lord has said, and confesses that the people of God have come under the chastenings of the Lord for their correction, but, he can add, “We shall not die” (ch. 1:12). If God deals in chastening with His people, it is that they may live in consistency with Himself: if He deals in judgment with His enemies, it is their everlasting destruction according to their own deserts. He sees clearly then, that in spite of the apparently overwhelming successes of the Chaldeans, they were really on the road to judgment, even if, in the meantime, they were being used by God for the judgment of others.

(Habakkuk 1:13). The prophet bases his conclusions, not simply on the wickedness of the enemy, but, on the holiness of God. God is “of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity” (ch. 1:13). Will God look on and remain silent, when the enemy blasphemes God, deals treacherously with the nations, and acts with greater unrighteousness than those they are being used to chastise?

(Habakkuk 1:14-16). This wicked nation was treating men as if they were mere fishes of the sea, or creeping things, that have no ruler to guide or protect them. Having possessed themselves of the weak and helpless, they used them to provide a good portion, and plenty, for themselves. Moreover, their crowning sin is that they make a god of the power by which they have obtained their successes, and thus set aside the true God.

(Habakkuk 1:17). The prophet sums up his plea by asking if they shall be allowed to continue slaying the nations and worshipping their net.

Habakkuk 2

(Habakkuk 2:1). Having closed his appeal to the Lord, the prophet takes his stand upon his watch-tower to look and hear what God will do and say. He acts in accord with the exhortation that tells us to watch and pray (Luke 21:36; Eph. 6:18). He does not watch merely to see what men will do, and thus be guided by sight; he watches to see what God will say, and thus walk by faith.

In Habakkuk 2:2-20, we have the Lord’s answer to the prophet’s appeal; an answer that is full of comfort for God’s people at all times of trial. The Lord’s words present a vision of the coming judgment upon the enemies of God’s people and of the blessing for which these judgments will prepare the way, when “The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (ch. 2:14).

(Habakkuk 2:2). The prophet is instructed to write the vision with such plainness, that he that reads may be energized to run with patience the race that is set before us—to use our New Testament exhortation. This surely is the meaning of these words, and not, as often assumed, “that the runner may read, but rather that the reader may run” (W.K.).

(Habakkuk 2:3). Secondly, we are assured of the absolute certainty of the vision. There is an appointed time for the judgment of the wicked and the deliverance of God’s people. For that time we may have to wait, but it will surely come and will not tarry a moment beyond the appointed time.

(Habakkuk 2:4). As ever, if God in mercy delays to exercise judgment, the wicked make it an occasion to exalt themselves and pursue their own lusts; even so we are warned that in these last days, there will be “scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of His coming?” (2 Peter 3:3-4).. In contrast to the wicked, the godly will find in this delay an occasion for the exercise of faith, for, “The just shall live by his faith” (ch. 2:4)—a passage quoted by the Apostle in the Epistle to the Hebrews to encourage believers to run with faith and patience, seeing that it is but “a little while and He that shall come will come, and will not tarry” (Heb. 10:37) (Heb. 10:36-38; 12:1). The people of God, whether in the prophet’s day or our own day are thus exhorted to run with spiritual energy; to wait with patience; and to live by faith.

(Habakkuk 2:5). Following these exhortations to the believer, the Lord formally pronounces judgment, in five woes, that would come upon the enemies of His people (Habakkuk 2:5-19). We are first told of the outstanding evils that lead to these governmental dealings of God. Intoxicated by his own vanity and pride, this restless enemy is not content to remain in his own country. His unsatisfied craving for power over others leads him to act with hellish desire to bring all nations under his control.

(Habakkuk 2:6-8). The oppression and injustice of this nation cries aloud to God for judgment. As the Lord had used the Chaldeans to chastise His people, and the nations, so now He uses the nations to judge the Chaldeans. For it is the nations who are used to take up a taunting proverb against these oppressors, and pronounce these woes upon them.

The first woe is called forth by the rapacity which leads the enemy to increase his possessions by seizing lands that are not his, in spite of “pledges” (JND) which he does not keep. Such wickedness unites the nations in a sudden rising against him, by which he is worried and vexed, and finally becomes a spoil to those that he has spoiled with bloodshed and violence.

(Habakkuk 2:9-11). The second woe is called forth by the covetousness (JND) which leads him to rob others to establish his own house, in the effort to set “his nest on high” (ch. 2:9). He would thus seek to be supreme over the nations, and make himself secure from attack. To reach this end he does not hesitate to stoop to the “cutting off many people” (ch. 2:10). Nations may be crushed and millions slain if thereby he can gratify his lust for power. But he has to learn that all this ruthless wickedness will turn to his own shame. The very stones and beams of the houses that he has ruined will be a witness against him and cry out for his judgment.

(Habakkuk 2:12-14). The third woe, pronounced against this nation that has sought to establish itself in power on a foundation of bloodshed and iniquity, tells us that these men will come under the fire of judgment against which they will weary themselves in vain (JND). The universal power over the nations is reserved for the Lord. “For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (ch. 2:14).

(Habakkuk 2:15-17). A fourth woe is called forth by a vision of the corruption, followed by violence that marks the activities of the enemy. With deceit and cunning they deceive the nations into a helpless condition, and thus prepare the way for attacking them with violence, in order to seek their own glory. In the end they will be filled with shame instead of glory, when made to drink of the cup of judgment from the hand of the Lord. They would be overwhelmed by the violence they had shown to others.

(Habakkuk 2:18-19). The final woe on this wicked nation is called forth by its greatest sin—a sin directly against God. The idolatry, and the teacher of lies, which lead men to trust in a false god, and thus deny the true God, would bring overwhelming judgment upon this wicked nation.

(Habakkuk 2:20). The judgment that overtakes this wicked nation establishes the great and blessed fact that, in spite of all the failure of God’s people and the increasing wickedness of the world, “The Lord is in His holy temple” (ch. 2:20). In His presence every mouth that is opened in rebellion to blaspheme His holy Name will at last be stopped. In the face then of the coming judgment upon the wicked, “Let all the earth keep silence before Him” (ch. 2:20).

In the Lord’s answer to the prophet’s appeal, we are thus assured that, in God’s appointed time, He will deal in judgment with all the evil of the world. There may be a waiting time, which calls for the exercise of faith, but faith is sustained by the assurance that whatever takes place among men, the Lord is in His holy temple, the unfailing resource of His people.

Habakkuk 3

(Habakkuk 3:1). Having stood upon his watch-tower, and heard the answer of the Lord to his appeal, the prophet now takes to his knees in prayer. In the midst of all his exercises and trials, he avails himself of the unfailing resource we have in the Lord Who is in His holy temple. He draws near to the throne of grace to find help in the time of need.

(Habakkuk 3:2). The prophet had seen the failure of the people of God and the work of the enemy in their midst. Now, with the holy fear of God in his heart, he prays that the Lord would work. He can say, “O Lord, revive Thy work” (ch. 3:2). He does not pray for a great public revival among the people of God, that might bring them into prominence, but he longs to see the Lord working in the midst of their trials—to see the Lord acting in mercy towards those who by their failure have brought upon themselves the chastening of the Lord.

(Habakkuk 3:3-6). Then in sublime language he recalls the different ways in which God had acted, in the past, for His own glory and the blessing of His people. He refers to Teman and Paran where there had been the most striking manifestations of divine power and glory, as we know from Deuteronomy 33:2. “Before Him” the enemies of His people were driven asunder and scattered, and every opposing power brought low.

(Habakkuk 3:7-12). The dwellings of the heathen were in affliction, and their lands trembled when, at the word of the Lord “the rods of discipline” (ch. 3:9) fell upon the nations (Habakkuk 3:9, JND). All the powers of nature—the rivers, the mountains, the sun and moon, were of no avail to stay the work of the Lord in judgment when He marched through the land in indignation, to thresh the nations in anger.

(Habakkuk 3:13-15). In thus acting the Lord was not only dealing with the wickedness of nations, but working for the salvation of His people—His anointed. To this end the leaders in wickedness, that came as a whirlwind to scatter and devour the afflicted, were overthrown by the mighty power of God.

(Habakkuk 3:16). This solemn dealing of God in judgment with the nations in the past, may, indeed, make the prophet realize the weakness and poverty of God’s people, and thus tremble in the presence of divine manifestation; nevertheless, it would lead the prophet to “rest in the day of trouble when their invader shall come up against the people” (JND).

(Habakkuk 3:17-19). The outcome of the experiences of the prophet are summed up in the sublime burst of praise with which his prophecy closes. He had learned the ways of God in government, set forth in chastening His people, and in judging their enemies. He had seen a vision that told him all God’s works in chastening and judgment, would lead to the everlasting salvation of His people, and, above all, to the earth being filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. He may have to wait for the fulfillment of the vision, but, living by faith, in this glorious future and the One Who will bring it to pass, he is prepared to face all the trials by the way. Want may stare him in the face; for the fruits of the earth may fail, the fields may yield no bread, and the flocks no meat. Nevertheless, the Lord is in His holy temple, and in the Lord he will rejoice, and joy in the God of his salvation. Weak in himself, he would find in the Lord God his strength, Who would enable him to walk in high places far above the distractions and sorrows of earth.

How encouraging to trace the way in which this God-fearing man is led from being on his face in anguish of soul before God because of the failure of God’s people, to take his stand on the watch-tower, to hear the words of the Lord. Then, having learned the mind of the Lord, to see him on his knees in prayer, with the result that finally he walks on high places with joy in his heart and praise on his lips.

We live in the difficult times of the last closing days when, the Church having failed in its responsibility to witness for Christ, judgment commences at the house of God: when the world, having failed in its responsibility to govern, is filled with violence and corruption, and while passing on to the judgments of the day of the Lord, even now has to reap in sorrow what it has sown in wickedness. In such a day, when the end of all things is at hand, it surely becomes us to learn the lessons of Habakkuk, and be “sober, and watch and pray” (1 Pet. 4:7). It is not for believers, in this day of grace, to call down judgment on their enemies, but, as with the prophet of old, in all the sorrows we may have to face, whether amongst the people of God, or in the world around, we have an unfailing resource, “The Lord is in His holy temple” (ch. 2:20). Christ remains, the Same yesterday, and today, and forever. He has gone “into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Heb. 9:24). Like the prophet of old, we can pour out the exercises of our souls before Him; we can watch to see His hand at work; we can express all our needs to Him in prayer; and, even now, be led in spirit into high places above all the storms to rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of our salvation.

May we then, in due season be on our faces in confession; on the watch-tower to learn the mind of the Lord; on our knees in prayer; and on the high places in praise.

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