

The Prophets

Lesson #35

Introduction To Habakkuk

I. **Structure Of Habakkuk**

- A. Habakkuk primarily deals with the age old problems of evil and human suffering. Although his book contains only three short chapters, they present a striking contrast. In the first two chapters, Habakkuk protests, complains and questions God. However, the final chapter is a beautiful psalm of praise. Habakkuk apparently used this complaining and questioning technique to drive home his powerful message about the approaching judgment of God.
- B. Habakkuk begins his book with a cry of woe. Injustice is rampant, the righteous are surrounded by the wicked, the law is powerless and God does not seem to care about the plight of His people (1:1-4). Habakkuk's prophecy is even introduced as a "burden" which the prophet saw (1:1). He wonders why God is allowing these things to happen.
- C. God's reply brings little comfort to the prophet. He explains that the armies of Babylon are moving throughout the ancient world on a campaign of death and destruction. At the time when Habakkuk received this vision, the Babylonians had already defeated Assyria and Egypt. The implication is that Habakkuk's nation, Judah, will be the next to fall.
- D. The prophet was shocked at the news. He reminded God of His justice and holiness (1:12-13). How could He use the wicked Babylonians to destroy His chosen people? Surely He realized the sins of His people were as nothing, when compared to the pagan Babylonians. "Why do you ... hold your tongue when the wicked devours one more righteous than he?" he asks (1:13). This direct question indicates Habakkuk's great faith. Only a person very close to God would dare question the purposes of the Almighty so boldly. God assures Habakkuk that the Babylonians will prevail not because they are righteous but because they are temporary instruments of judgment in His hands (2:4). Then he pronounces five burdens of woe against the Babylonians (2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19). God will not be mocked; the end of the Babylonians is as certain as the judgment they will bring on Judah. In all of this, God will vindicate His righteous character: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (2:14).
- E. After this assurance, Habakkuk breaks out with the beautiful psalm of praise to God contained in chapter 3. This is one of the greatest testimonies of faith in the Bible. It is bold in conception, sublime in

thought, majestic in diction and pure in rhetoric. The psalm supplements the prophet's message, that of each being to encourage and keep alive within the nation a spirit of hope and trust in God.

II. **Authorship And Date**

- A. Nothing is known about the prophet Habakkuk except his name which means "embrace" or "pressed to the heart." Cunningham Geikie says, "His name, as Luther well puts it, speaks as one who took his nation to his heart, comforted it and held it up, as one embraces and presses to his bosom a poor weeping child, calming and consoling it with good hope -- if God will." Habakkuk was surely a sensitive poet as well as a courageous spokesman for God. His little book is a literary masterpiece that points people of all ages to faith in God and His eternal purpose.
- B. Various dates from 630 B.C. to a date during the Babylonian captivity have been assigned for the writing of Habakkuk. The most probable is somewhere between 612-606 B.C. Habakkuk says in 3:16, "Because I must wait quietly for the day of distress, For the people to arise who will invade us." This places the date before the Chaldean invasion. Assyria fell to Babylon in 612 B.C. When Habakkuk spoke, Nebuchadnezzar was already pressing westward, but had not reached Jerusalem. The oppression of Judah and the carrying of the first group into Babylon, 605 B.C., had not yet taken place. It seems best, therefore, to assign the preaching of Habakkuk to a date shortly before 606 B.C., but after the beginning of Babylon's westward move for world conquest.

III. **Historical Setting**

- A. The book of Habakkuk belongs to that turbulent era in ancient history when the balance of power was shifting from the Assyrians to the Babylonians. Assyria's domination came to an end with the destruction of its capital city, Nineveh, by the invading Babylonians in 612 B.C.
- B. When Nineveh fell, Babylon secured its independence and entered on its short but brilliant career of conquest. Nabopolassar, who had joined with the Medes and aided in the capture of Nineveh, obtained the hand of the Median king's daughter for his son Nebuchadnezzar, and received, as the reward of his treachery, not only Babylonia itself, but a large portion of the Assyrian territory, including Syria and Palestine. Thus the way was prepared for the interference of the Babylonians in Jewish affairs. The overthrow of Pharaoh-Necho, king of Egypt, at Carchemish by Nebuchadnezzar left the Babylonian monarch free to punish the revolt of Jehoiakim (2 Kings 24:1-7), and to continue the hostile measures which culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of the Jews.

- C. Less than 20 years after Habakkuk wrote his book, the Babylonians also destroyed Jerusalem and carried the leading citizens of Judah into captivity. God used this pagan nation to punish the Israelites for their unfaithfulness and worship of false gods.

IV. **Scriptural Contribution**

- A. The book of Habakkuk differs from other books of prophecy in one special aspect. Instead of taking God's message directly to the people, he takes the complaint of the people to God, representing them in the complaint. The question-and-answer technique of the prophet Habakkuk teaches a valuable lesson about the nature of God. That God allows Himself to be questioned by one of His followers is an indication of His longsuffering mercy and grace.
- B. The theme of God's judgment against unrighteousness also is woven throughout the book. God soon will punish His wayward people for their transgression, but He also will punish the pagan Babylonians because of their great sin. God always acts in justice. God may tolerate wickedness for a season, but ultimately it must reap its just recompense of reward. He will not forget mercy while pouring out his wrath (3:2). His judgment will fall on the proud, but the just will live in His faithfulness (2:4). God's acts of judgment are in accord with His holiness, righteousness and mercy.
- C. Habakkuk also deals with discipline and faith as the condition of life. The constant riddle of the Old Testament is not "survival of the fittest but the suffering of the best." In Job it was the suffering of an individual; in Habakkuk, that of a nation. Habakkuk also teaches that the just shall live by faith and he is known as "the prophet of faith." Faith to the prophet meant more than simple trust. The word conveys a trust in God which produces faithfulness, steadfastness, firmness, persistency, endurance, patience and even loyalty. Also, life to Habakkuk meant more than national prosperity. It mean moral security even in the midst of calamity. A living faith determines destiny: abiding in life and surviving in judgment.

V. **Special Considerations**

- A. The Protestant Reformation under Martin Luther was influenced by the book of Habakkuk. Luther's mistreatment of the biblical doctrine that the just shall live by faith came from his study of the apostle Paul's teachings in Romans and Galatians.
- B. However, Paul's famous declaration, "The just shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17), is a direct quotation from Habakkuk 2:4. Thus, in this brief prophetic book, we find the seeds of the glorious gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.