

Habakkuk Chapter 1

The prophet Habakkuk penned this book (in approximately 605 B.C.). This was about the time the Babylonians came into power. Very little is known about him, except his work in this book. The theme of the book is the mystery of providence. Habakkuk was troubled over the sinful world going unpunished.

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, Habakkuk was well preserved. Paul referred to Habakkuk (chapter 2 verse 4).

Romans 1:17 "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith."

It was these two Scriptures which influenced Martin Luther greatly, and he started the protestant reformation.

Verses 1-4: "Burden" (Hebrew masa', "heavy load" or "oracle"), also describes the prophecies of Nahum (Nah. 1:1), and Malachi (Mal. 1:1), as that which the Lord has entrusted to His prophet. It was a sentence of divine judgment.

Habakkuk 1:1 "The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see."

"Burden" A weighty oracle of judgment (1:5-11; 2:2-20), is often depicted by this term when employed by the prophets to announce God's wrath against sin (e.g., Isa 13:1; 15:1; 17:1; 19:1 Nahum 1:1; Zech. 9:1; 12:1; Mal. 1:1).

"Did see": God's message to Habakkuk took the form of a vision.

The word "burden", lets us know that Habakkuk was troubled by what he saw around him. The statement "did see", possibly means that Habakkuk had a vision from God.

Verses 2-4: In Habakkuk's first complaint, he perceived that God appeared indifferent to Judah's sin. Jealous for His righteousness and knowing that a breach of the covenant required judgment (Deut. 28), Habakkuk questioned God's wisdom, expressing bewilderment at His seeming inactivity in the face of blatant violation of His law.

The Jews had sinned by violence and injustice and should have been punished by the same.

Verses 2-3: Violence ... iniquity ... grievance ... spoiling": Judah's society is defined with 4 terms denoting malicious wickedness by which one morally and ethically oppresses his neighbor, resulting in contention and strife.

Habakkuk 1:2 "O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! [even] cry out unto thee [of] violence, and thou wilt not save!"

“How long ... shall I cry”: The phrase, reflecting the prophet’s impatience, is frequently used by the psalmist to express similar thoughts of perplexity (Psalms 13:1-2; 62:3; Jeremiah 14:9; Matthew 27:46).

“And thou wilt not save”: The prophet wanted a cleansing, purging, chastening, and revival among the people that would return them to righteousness.

This is a plea to God to hear his prayers. He sees the injustice around him, and does not understand why God is not punishing those involved. We have all, at some time or other, cried out "how long"?

It appears from this that Habakkuk had prayed many times to God to do something about the moral decay of Judah. It appears, that those who pretended to belong to God (Judah), had strayed very far away. And Habakkuk had prayed so much about the seriousness of the problem, he had begun to doubt that God was hearing his prayers.

Habakkuk 1:3 "Why dost thou show me iniquity, and cause [me] to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence [are] before me: and there are [that] raise up strife and contention."

That is, wicked men, and such as give a great deal of trouble, vexation, and grief to others, by seizure of property and oppression. Suggesting that he could not turn his eyes anywhere, but such persons presented themselves to his view. And that their wicked actions were performed by them openly and publicly, in the sight of all, without any shame or fear.

“For spoiling and violence are before me”: In my sight and presence, though a prophet, and notwithstanding all my protests, exhortations, and reproofs. Such were the hardness, obstinacy, and impudence of this people. To such a height and pitch of iniquity were they arrived, as to regard not the prophets of the Lord.

“And there are that raise up strife and contention”: In the kingdom, in cities, in families; in one man, brother, friend, and neighbor, against another. Which occasion lawsuits, and in them justice is not done, as follows. It may be rendered, and "there shall be and is a man of strife".

From this it appears that Habakkuk was in the ministry. He was like a watchman. He saw all the evil and warned the people, yet God had not punished them. He is asking God, why He allows him to see all of the wrong, if God is not going to change it.

Habakkuk is a righteous man, living in a society that has gone mad. He is questioning how God can know of these sins and abominations, and not do anything about them. I personally look at society today, and wonder why God has not thundered in judgment against our society.

This strife and contention is speaking of those rebellious who are not keeping God's law. Perhaps, those that question God's law is some who should know better, because they are the leaders of the people.

Habakkuk 1:4 "Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth."

"Law is slacked": Literally the "law is chilled, numbed" (Gen. 45:26; Psalm 77:2). It had no respect, was given no authority. As hands rendered useless by cold, the impact and effectiveness of the law was paralyzed by the corruption of Judah's leaders (Eccl. 8:11).

Not only are the wicked people not keeping God's law, but they are attacking the righteous. They are actually opposed to those who have taken a stand for God. The law which had governed even their civil law is unequal. Habakkuk is disappointed that justice is no longer part of their society.

Verses 5-11: In response to Habakkuk's perplexity and pleading, God broke His silence, informing him that He was not indifferent to Judah's sin; but rather than revival, He was sending the "dreaded and feared" judgment (verse 7).

Habakkuk 1:5 "Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvelously: for [I] will work a work in your days, [which] ye will not believe, though it be told [you]."

"Behold ... regard ... wonder": The series of commands is plural, indicating that the wider community of Judah and Jerusalem was to take note of this imminent invasion. Paul quotes this text (in Acts. 13:41).

Up until this Scripture, Habakkuk had been complaining to God. In this Scripture, we see an answer to Habakkuk from God. Habakkuk is living for God in the middle of those who do not. During Habakkuk's lifetime, God will take care of this situation.

God will work so quickly and marvelously, that it will be difficult for Habakkuk to believe. God will use a heathen nation to bring the chastisement upon His people. Those of God's children, who are living in sin, will not expect their punishment to come through a heathen nation. God can use whoever He wants to, however.

Verses 6-11: The prophet describes the mighty "Chaldeans" who ruled Babylon (from 625 to 539 B.C.). They were Semitic nomads who were descendants of Chesed, the son of Abraham's brother Nahor (Gen. 22:20-22).

They gradually populated southern Babylon and were under Assyrian authority until Nabopolassar destroyed Nineveh (in 612 B.C.), and founded the Neo-Babylonian Empire, which reached its greatest height under Nebuchadnezzar (see the note on Dan. 1:1).

The success of the Chaldeans is attributed to their swiftness and “violence.” To “heap dust” refers to building ramparts of earth to scale the walls of the enemy cities.

“His god” is Marduk, god of war and the patron god of Babylon.

Verses 6-8: The Chaldeans (Babylonians), would come at the behest of the divine Commander. He is the Sovereign who brings this people of ruthless character and conduct to invade Judah. The Chaldeans are described as self-assured, self-sufficient, self-deified, and deadly (Jer. 51:20).

Habakkuk 1:6 "For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, [that] bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling places [that are] not theirs."

A people that were mean and low, famous only for their soothsaying, divination, and judicial astrology. But now had become a powerful and warlike people, rising up under the permission of Providence to universal monarchy, and who would quickly add Judea to their dominions.

"That bitter and hasty nation": A cruel and merciless people in their temper and disposition. "Bitter" against the people of God and true religion, and causing bitterness, calamities, and distress, wherever they came. "Hasty" and precipitate in their determinations; swift and nimble in their motions; active and vigorous in the prosecution of their designs.

"Which shall march through the breadth of the land": Or "breadths of the land". Through the whole world, as they were attempting to do, having subdued Syria, all Asia, and great part of Africa. Through which they boldly marched, bearing down all opposition that was in their way.

Or “through the breadth of the land” of Judea, taking all the fenced cities as they went along, and Jerusalem the metropolis of it (see Isa. 8:7).

"To possess the dwelling places that are not theirs": The cities of Judea, and houses in them. As well as the palaces and dwelling places in Jerusalem, which they had no right unto, but what they got by the sword. Which were the legal possessions and inheritances of others from father to son from ages past.

These the Chaldeans would take from them. And not only take them, and spoil and plunder them for the present, but retain them in their possession, as an inheritance to be transmitted to their posterity. This may have some respect to the length of the captivity of the Jews, and their land being in the hands of their enemies for the space of seventy years.

The Chaldeans are even more evil than Judah. God always begins His judgment with the house of God. It is the chastisement God has judged, that will come upon them. It is just Babylon, (Chaldeans), that it comes by. They were a very cruel army. We must remember that God sent them.

Habakkuk 1:7 "They [are] terrible and dreadful: their judgment and their dignity shall proceed of themselves."

For the fierceness of their countenances; the number and valor of their troops; the splendor of their armor; the victories they had obtained, and the cruelty they had exercised. The fame of all, which spread terror wherever they came.

"Their judgment and their dignity shall proceed of themselves": They will not be directed and governed by any laws of God and man, but by their own. They will do according to their will and pleasure, and none will be able to gainsay and resist them. They will hear no reason or argument.

Their decrees and determinations they make of themselves shall be put into execution, and there will be no opposing their tyrannical measures. They will usurp a power, and take upon them an authority over others of themselves, which all must submit unto. No mercy and pity: no goodness and humanity are to be expected from such lawless and imperious enemies.

At the time they attack Judah, they have become very powerful. There seemed to be no one who could stop them. They will not be aware that God sends them to attack Judah.

Habakkuk 1:8 "Their horses also are swifter than the leopards, and are more fierce than the evening wolves: and their horsemen shall spread themselves, and their horsemen shall come from far; they shall fly as the eagle [that] hasteth to eat."

"Evening wolves": These were wolves who had suffered hunger all day long and were forced to prowl into the night for food. Like wolves, Babylon's army displayed extraordinary stamina and an undaunted eagerness to attack for the purpose of devouring the spoils of victory.

They are a mighty world army, and they have many horses. They will sweep across this little land quickly, bringing destruction along the way. The comparison to "evening wolves" speaks of their ferocious nature.

Jeremiah 5:6 "Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, [and] a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities: every one that goeth out thence shall be torn in pieces: because their transgressions are many, [and] their backslidings are increased."

Habakkuk 1:9 "They shall come all for violence: their faces shall sup up [as] the east wind, and they shall gather the captivity as the sand."

"They shall come all for violence": Or, "the whole of it"; the whole army of the Chaldeans, every one of them. This would be their sole view, not to do themselves justice, as might be pretended, or avenge any injuries or affronts done to them by the Jews; but purely for the sake of spoil and plunder.

"Their faces shall sup up as the east wind": Their countenances will appear so stern and fierce, that their very looks will so frighten, as to cause men to sink and die through terror. Just as herbs and plants shrivel up and wither away, when blasted by a nipping east wind.

So the Targum, "the reception or look of their faces is like to a vehement east wind". Some render it, "the look or design of their faces is to the east."

When the Chaldeans were on their march to Judea, their faces were to the west or south west. But then their desire and views were, that when they had got the spoil they came for, as in the preceding clause, to carry it to Babylon, which lay eastward or north east of Judea, and there their faces looked.

"And they shall gather the captivity as the sand": Or gather up persons, both in Judea, and in other countries conquered by them, as innumerable as the sand of the sea, and carry them captive into their own land. Captivity is used for captives.

The mention of the "east wind" is speaking of an ill wind. The "supping up" is just speaking of total destruction. The "gathering as of sand" speaks of the large number of people taken.

Romans 9:27 "Isaiah also crieth concerning Israel, Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved:"

Habakkuk 1:10 And they shall scoff at the kings, and the princes shall be a scorn unto them: they shall deride every strong hold; for they shall heap dust, and take it."

Whether it be royal authority or physical obstacles, the Babylonian army marched forward with nothing but scorn for those in their path.

“Heap dust”: Rubble and dirt piled up against the fortress or city wall as a ramp to gain entry.

The Chaldeans who came had no respect for kings, or princes. They were treated the same as all the other people. The walls, or the fortress, were no problem to them. They went through the land with such destruction they left piles of dust.

They took the valuable things and burned all the rest. They left nothing of any help to the people. They were such a powerful army, that they were almost impossible to stop. God had moved away from His people, and left them to defend themselves. They were no match (in the physical), for these Chaldeans.

Habakkuk 1:11 "Then shall [his] mind change, and he shall pass over, and offend, [imputing] this his power unto his god."

“His power unto his god”: Though the Chaldeans were God’s instruments of judgment, their self-sufficiency and self-adulation planted the seeds for their own destruction (described in 2:2-20), as they stood guilty of idolatry and blasphemy before the sovereign Lord.

It was God's judgment on His people that allowed this heathen army to succeed. They were so arrogant; they gave no credit to God, but instead said their false gods had helped them conquer. The sad thing about this army that came sweeping through was they went beyond the limits God had set for them.

Verses 12 – 2:1: Habakkuk, in his reaction to the perplexing revelation (verses 5-11), declared his confidence in the Lord (verse 12), then unveiled his second complaint. Namely, how could the Lord use a wicked nation (the Chaldeans), to judge a nation (Judah), more righteous than they (verses 13-17)? The prophet ended by expressing his determination to wait for an answer (2:1).

Verses 12-17: The prophet appeals to God not to “look” on Babylonia’s “iniquity” approvingly, and calls on Him to judge the mighty nation that has caught the other “nations” in its fish “net.”

Habakkuk 1:12 "[Art] thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die. O LORD, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction."

“O Lord my God, mine Holy One”: Although the prophet could not fully comprehend the sovereign workings of his righteous God, he expressed his complete faith and trust. As he rehearsed the unchangeable character of God as eternal, sovereign, and holy, he became assured that Judah would not be completely destroyed (Jer. 31:35-40; 33:23-26).

Under the faithful hand of God, he realized that the Chaldeans were coming to correct, not annihilate.

“O mighty God”: A title for God which expresses His immovable and unshakeable character (Psalms 18:2, 31, 46; 31:2-3; 62:2, 6-7; 78:16, 20, 35).

This is a request from Habakkuk to God for the covenant people. He knows in his heart, that God will stop this onslaught, before they destroy God's people. Habakkuk is recognizing God in His might in this. He knows that God can stop this chastisement, if He will. Habakkuk is speaking for himself, and for all of the others who had not bowed their knee to Baal.

Sometimes, when the chastisement of God comes upon a people, some innocents get hurt in the process. This was the case here. Habakkuk knows they need to be chastised for their unfaithfulness to God, but he believes God will stop, before they are destroyed.

Hebrews 12:5-6 "And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him:" "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth."

Habakkuk 1:13 "[Thou art] of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, [and] holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth [the man that is] more righteous than he?"

“Thou art of purer eyes”: In spite of the prophet’s expressions of faith and trust, he found himself in even further perplexity. The essence of Habakkuk’s next quandary is expressed in this verse. If God is too pure to behold evil, then how can He use the wicked to devour a person more righteous than they?

Would not God's use of the Chaldeans result in even greater damage to His righteous character?

Habakkuk is reminding God, that the Chaldeans (Babylonians), are eviller than God's unfaithful family. He is questioning God about using such an evil people to chastise His people. Habakkuk is reminding God, that He is holy and cannot look upon sin without destroying it.

Habakkuk is questioning the wisdom of God overlooking the Babylonian's sins, and punishing His own people who are comparatively less sinful.

Verses 14-17: Lest God had forgotten just how wicked the Chaldeans were, Habakkuk drew attention to their evil character and behavior. Life was cheap to the Chaldeans. In the face of their ruthless tactics of war, other societies were "like the fish of the sea, like creeping things without a ruler."

In light of their reputation (verses 6-10), how could God have unleashed this ruthless force upon another helpless people?

Habakkuk 1:14 "And makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, [that have] no ruler over them?"

That is, suffers them to be used as the fishes of the sea, which are easily taken in the net, and are common to everyone. Whosoever will may take them up, and kill them, and use them for their food. And which also among themselves are often hardly used, the lesser being devoured by the greater.

And in like manner the prophet suggests, that the people of the Jews, who were men made after the image of God, and made for society and usefulness, and moreover were God's covenant people.

And it might have been expected, that a more special providence would have attended them, more than other men, and especially than what attended the fishes of the sea. Yet it looked as if there were no more care taken of them than of these.

"As the creeping things that have no ruler over them": Not the creeping things of the earth, but of the water. The lesser sort of fishes that move in the water; or those that more properly creep, as crabs, prawns, and shrimps (see Psalm 104:25). Who have none to protect and defend them, and restrain others from taking and hurting them.

This may seem contrary to what Aristotle and Pliny say of some fishes, that they go in company, and have a leader or governor. But, as Bochart observes, it is one thing to be a leader of the way, a guide and director, which way to steer their course in swimming. And another thing to be as the general of an army, to protect and defend, or under whose directions they might defend themselves.

Such a one the prophet denies they had. And so, the prophet complains, this was the case of the Jews. They were exposed to the cruelty of their enemies, as if there was no God that governed in the world. And no providence to direct and order things for the preservation of men, and to keep good men from being hurt by evil men.

Or those that were weak and feeble from being oppressed by the powerful and mighty; this he reasons with the Lord about, and was desirous of an answer to it.

Habakkuk is appealing to God to see the merciless way they are coming and sweeping away God's people, as fishermen catches fish in his net without discrimination. The creeping things and fish have no one to take their part. Habakkuk thinks God's people do no longer have Him to take their part.

Habakkuk 1:15 "They take up all of them with the angle, they catch them in their net, and gather them in their drag: therefore they rejoice and are glad."

The prophet continues the metaphor of fishing, and observes the different ways of taking fish; which is to be applied to the case he is speaking of. As fishermen take all they can with their angles, so "they" or "he", for it is in the singular number.

Nebuchadnezzar and his army take up all out of the sea of the world; are ambitious of getting all kingdoms and nations of the world under their power and dominion. And particularly all of Judea with all the inhabitants, good or bad, without any distinction.

For all were fish which came to their net. This may design the artful and alluring methods they first made use of to get the people into their hands, by making covenants with them, and drawing them into making of presents, and paying of tribute.

"They catch them in their net, and gather them in their drag": With the angle the fisherman catches fish one by one, but with the net great numbers. And what he misses by throwing the net, he gets by using the drag. All which may be expressive of the ways and methods used by the king of Babylon and his army, both in the times of Jeconiah, and of Zedekiah.

Under the former he used the net, and carried off large numbers. And with them the royal family and great substance, but left many behind. Under the latter he came and swept away all, drained the land of its riches and its inhabitants.

"Therefore they rejoice and are glad": As fishermen do when they have good sport; so these people rejoiced in their own success, and in the calamities of their neighbors.

This is just saying that this army of the Chaldeans has taken whole nations before them, without sparing anyone. The net of a fisherman catches everything in front of the net. The army rejoices over the capture of all these people, as a fisherman does when he has a large catch of fish.

Habakkuk 1:16 "Therefore they sacrifice unto their net, and burn incense unto their drag; because by them their portion [is] fat, and their meat plenteous."

“Sacrifice ... burn incense unto their drag”: If that is not enough, the prophet added that they attributed their gain to their own military might rather than to the true God.

"Because by them their portion is fat, and their meat plenteous": That is, by their angle, net, and drag. Or by those things signified by them, the arts and methods they used to subdue nations, conquer kingdoms, and bring them into subjection to them.

They enlarged their dominions, increased their riches and revenues, and had plenty of everything that was desirable for food and raiment, for pleasure and profit. Or to gratify the most unbounded ambition, having everything that heart could wish for and desire. The allusion is to making sumptuous feasts, and rich banquets, on occasion of victories obtained.

These Chaldeans (Babylonians), do not even recognize the fact that God has helped them make this catch. They thank their false gods for their victory, by burning incense to them.

Habakkuk 1:17 "Shall they therefore empty their net, and not spare continually to slay the nations?"

“Empty their net”: How long will the aggressor (the Chaldeans), be permitted to pursue injustice and engage in such wickedness? Can God tolerate it indefinitely?

As soon as they have caught one group, they go out with their net again, and catch another. This is the way of this evil army. They go from one nation to another taking the people captive, and killing those who are not useful to them. They are never satisfied. They have in mind conquering the whole world. As if God is not aware of this, Habakkuk reminds Him.

Habakkuk Chapter 1 Questions

1. Approximately when was the book of Habakkuk penned?
2. What is the theme of this book?
3. What greatly troubled Habakkuk?
4. What Scripture Paul wrote, is the same as Habakkuk 2:4?
5. What influenced Martin Luther so much, that he started the protestant reformation?
6. What does verse 1 reveal about Habakkuk's message?
7. What is verse 2 pleading with God about?
8. Habakkuk had prayed many times for God to do what?
9. In verse 2 it appears that Habakkuk had begun to doubt what?

10. Habakkuk was probably, in the _____.
11. Habakkuk was a _____ man, who lived in a society gone mad with sin.
12. What does the author wonder about our society today?
13. These evil people are actually _____ to those who have taken a stand for God.
14. When does God say He will take care of this situation?
15. What will be unexpected about the chastisement God sends upon His people?
16. Who does God rise up to chastise His people?
17. What kind of army was the Chaldeans (Babylonians)?
18. Their horses are swifter than _____.
19. They shall gather the captivity as the _____.
20. How will they treat the kings and princes?
21. Who does this army give credit for their victory to?
22. What is Habakkuk requesting in verse 12?
23. God can stop this _____ if He will.
24. What is Habakkuk reminding God of in verse 13?
25. What are the men compared to in verse 14?
26. What is Habakkuk complaining about the army God sent, that is compared to a fish net?
27. What do these Babylonians (Chaldeans), have in their mind to do?