

HABAKKUK CHAPTER 1

For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scripture might have hope. (Romans 15:4).

1 The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see.

Initially, for organizational purposes, I should tell you that the first four verses of this chapter find Habakkuk complaining of the apparent triumph of wickedness among his countrymen.

Here we learn that Habakkuk was a prophet, and he was allowed to see some things. What he foresaw, called a "burden", was grievous calamities and heavy judgments. The servants of God are deeply afflicted by seeing ungodliness and violence prevail.

The name Habakkuk means "strong embrace" which fits in nicely with the subject of this prophecy; that is, cleaving fast to God amongst the perplexities of things this prophet is seeing all around him.

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!

This distressed man is crying out to God for help in the midst of ongoing violence all around him. The idea here is that Habakkuk has been a long time crying and pining for justice in the midst of the iniquity, strife and contention he is living in, but no change had come. There had been no correcting of course or punishment of the wicked. There had been no salvation by *changing the bad, or restraining them, or by overthrowing them, and setting up just and upright men in their room.* (Poole).

³ Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention.

The Psalmist declared that God sees the wrongdoing and corrects it. **Thou hast seen it; for thou beholdest mischief and spite, to requite it with thy hand: the poor committeth himself unto thee; thou art the helper of the fatherless.** (Psalm 10:14). But here, the overwhelmed prophet declares God is not coming on the scene but instead is leaving the evildoers unpunished. Instead, it seems to Habakkuk that the ongoing spoiling, robberies, strife, contention, rapine, oppression, perversion of the law and endless jarrings of man with man run free. Why, asks Habakkuk, am I living in this time and place of such unrequited discord?

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

Habakkuk continues with his complaining observations. There are no judicial sentences except those that favor the wicked. The law is paralyzed (slacked) and therefore unable to do its proper work. The result is that the wicked only flourish and prosper, at the expense of the Lord's people.

This is Psalm 73 time: **Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches. Verily, I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.** (Psalm 73:12-14).

Now, so far, I have managed to not mention the "elephant in the room" verse that I'm sure all of you are expecting to hear. I will hold you in suspense no longer. Here it is: **Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.** (Ecclesiastes 8:11). And here's a verse that runs a close second: **How long will ye judge unjustly, and accept the persons of the wicked? Selah.** (Psalm 82:2).

⁵Behold 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.

We now segue into Jehovah's answer to Habakkuk's complaints. God's chosen agents, the Chaldeans, are on the way; a brutal military invasion is imminent. God is about to make the heathen instruments of his vengeance. And you are not going to believe what is coming your way, even if you were told in vivid detail – judgments too great to be described and too incredible to be believed. **Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you.** (Acts 13:41). This is very yummy stuff!

Barnes says on this verse: *So it ever is. Man never believes that God is in earnest until His judgments come. So it was before the flood, and with Sodom, and with Lot's sons-in-law; so it was with Ahab and Jezebel; so with this destruction of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans[.]* Similarly, please recall Jeremiah 5:12: **They have belied the Lord, and said, It is not he; neither shall evil come upon us; neither shall we see sword nor famine[.]**

⁶For, lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwellingplaces that are not theirs.

This is the Lord's work! These Chaldeans were warlike people, well-suited for the task at hand. "Bitter and hasty" suggests these fighting machines were cruel, fierce and impetuous, characterized by sudden or rash action, impulsive, violent. Indeed, these invading soldiers were quick and effective in executing their merciless purposes.

And these finely-honed intruders went through all parts of the land; no corner or cul-de-sac escaped, and their goal was not to spoil but to take and keep possession of the sacred land.

⁷They are terrible and dreadful: their judgment and their dignity shall proceed of themselves.

Here we are given more of the picture as to the type of personnel doing this job. Their "judgment", that is to say the way they would rule, was to be without paying regard to anything but their own will ("themselves"),

recognizing no Supreme Being as the source of justice and their government unsanctioned by the King of kings and Lord of lords. They perhaps placed their hand on the Bible and swore allegiance to the Creator of all things, but that was mere cover for lawless insolence.

Daniel 11:36-37 gives us a flavor: **And the king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvelous things against the God of gods, and shall prosper till the indignation be accomplished: for that that is determined shall be done. Neither shall he regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god: for he shall magnify himself above all.**

⁸Their 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.

You know that feeling you get when you are starving? That's the concept here. The ideas intended by these words are those of activity and ferocity, prompted by hunger. **Behold, they belch out with their mouth: swords are in their lips[.]** (Psalm 59:7). The evening wolf coming out of his lair to find prey is a perfect picture of ravenous greediness. God's punishment is likened here to an "evening wolf", and similarly in other locations, such as Zephaniah 3:3 and Jeremiah 5:6 (**a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them**).

Not to mention leopards. Also from Jeremiah 5:6 we see this: **[A] leopard shall watch over their cities.** Barnes tell us the "leopard" mentioned in this text is the panther, *the lightest, swiftest, fiercest, most bloodthirsty of beasts of prey (that) runs most swiftly and rushes brave and straight. You would say, when you saw it, that it is borne through the air. * * * It bounds exceedingly and is exceedingly light to spring down on whatever it pursues.*

And let us not overlook the other animal here mentioned, the eagle. **Our persecutors are swifter than the eagles of the heaven: they pursued us upon the mountains, they laid wait for us in the wilderness.**

(Lamentations 4:19). Enjoy these thoughts from Gill about eagles in this context: *[T]hose horsemen shall be so speedy in their march, that they shall seem rather to fly than ride, and even to fly as swift as the eagle, the swiftest of birds, and which itself flies swiftest when hungry, and in sight of its prey.*

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.

This is all about violence; everywhere you look -- violence! The sole object of everybody is not to establish just rights, but to get everything they can by violence.

These invaders are like a blast of hot air from the east, passing over the land, and leaving it scorched and blighted. Poole tells us their *very countenance shall be as blasting, pestiferous [harboring infection and disease], and dangerous as is the east wind in those countries[.]* These marauders are so stern and fierce that they cause men to sink and die through terror, just as herbs and plants shrivel and wither away when blasted by an east wind.

Prisoners shall be taken as easily as gathering sand, and shall be as numerous as the sands of the sea.

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.

Kings and princes, governors, magistrates, and the like are deposed or enthroned at the raider's pleasure or caprice, like it's a sport. Self-government is out the window. There is no longer any need to argue over whether an election was free, fair and secure.

This heaping dust is an interesting concept. These conquerors would use mounds of earth commonly used in sieges. They placed the besieger on a level playing field with the besieged and allowed the trespasser's weapons to be planted at an advantage. It was an old and simple form of siege, especially adapted to the great masses of these armies. We read about them

in other Old Testament passages, such as Ezekiel 17:17: **Neither shall Pharaoh with his mighty army and great company make for him in the war, by casting up mounts, and building forts, to cut off many persons[.]** 2 Kings 19:32 talks about this military tool: **Therefore thus saith the Lord concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast a bank against it.** Jeremiah's mournful prophecies included this: **For thus hath the Lord of hosts said, Hew ye down trees, and cast a mount against Jerusalem: this is the city to be visited; she is wholly oppression in the midst of her.** (Jeremiah 6:6).

¹¹ Then shall his mind change, and he shall pass over, and offend, imputing this his power unto his god.

The idea here is that the invading forces, and more particularly their leaders, shall have such abundant and extraordinary success and a continued series of them, that they become haughty and proud and then literally lose their rationale mind and cast aside all notions of reason or moderation in their activities. Consequently, they go overboard and pass over all bounds and restraints. It's similar to what happened to Nebuchadnezzar when he became too full of himself and changed from a man's heart to that of a beast. **Let his heart be changed from man's, and let a beast's heart be given unto him; and let seven times pass over him.** (Daniel 4:16).

Additionally, these occupiers brazenly attribute their overwhelming military successes to their false gods, or declare themselves to be gods, such is what is meant by the closing clause **imputing this his power unto his god.**

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.

The scene now changes a bit as we enter a new oracle or phase of this writing. Greatly perplexed by what he is seeing, Habakkuk feels sure that the God whom this swaggering conqueror has insulted will at last vindicate himself.

This verse can literally be read *Jehovah, for judgment hast Thou appointed him, and Oh Rock, for chastisement hast Thou founded him*, the "him" being the Chaldean invader, whom Habakkuk here declares was raised up only to be God's instrument of correction. Habakkuk declares who is really in charge of all this, the everlasting God, as opposed to the false and powerless gods of the occupiers.

Our anguished prophet then declares that the result will not be final destruction; Israel will not be utterly cut off and destroyed by this assault.

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?

The prophet's just-expressed confidence is tempered, however, with anxiety. Why is God not looking with disdain and dislike at the violence of these idolatrous Chaldeans? In a word, why is God letting this happen? This is Psalm 73:12 time: **Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.**

But you will note Habakkuk checks himself from being carried too far in voicing this complaint by highlighting the honorable sentiments of God. God's eyes, says the prophet, are too pure to behold this evil thing. Those eyes, running to and fro, are the gateway to intelligence and knowledge. **Thou hast seen it; for thou beholdest mischief and spite, to requite it with thy hand: the poor committeth himself unto thee; thou art the helper of the fatherless. Break thou the arm of the wicked and the evil man: seek out his wickedness till thou find none.** (Psalm 10:14, 15).

¹⁴ And makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them?

This is a picture of utter chaos and anarchy. There is no government, no ruler, nothing to check the cruel, ravenous and insatiable appetites of these oppressors. No King to defend. Fishes in the ocean are mute and helpless in a stormy and restless element, and easily captured by nets. The greater fish live on the lesser and all day long feed on the smaller fry. And the creeping things are the lowest of all, whether in the sea or on land. **So is this great and wide sea, wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts.** (Psalm 104:25).

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.

Members of this unstable society are captured by wiles (bait) or by violence (net) – whatever works. This invading army is intent on taking all the inhabitants, good and bad, without distinction. Some are caught by the angle, one by one, and some are carried off in large numbers by the net. And once done, the invaders rejoice, as fishermen who are successful in their haul, glad in their successes and in the calamities of their neighbors.

¹⁶ Therefore they sacrifice unto their net, and burn incense unto their drag; because by them their portion is fat, and their meat plenteous.

Continuing with the fishing metaphor, these trespassers now deify their military prowess and weapons of mass destruction, by which they gained victory. Oh yes, it is time to worship the military. Huge military parades and majestic flyovers are the order of the day; but no glory to God. They idolize themselves for their own cleverness and might. **And thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth.** (Deuteronomy 8:17).

Hear the boasting king (small “k”): **For he saith, By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom; for I am prudent: and I have removed the bounds of the people, and have robbed their treasures, and I have put down the inhabitants like a valiant man: And my hand hath found as a nest the riches of the people: and as one gathereth eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that**

moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or peeped. Shall the ax boast itself against him that heweth therewith? Or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? As if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood. (Isaiah 10:13-15).

And we learn from this verse the conquerors bask in great spoils. They enlarge their dominions, increase their riches, and have everything desirable for food and raiment, for pleasure and profit. Life is great.

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

The plaintive question being asked here by the old prophet is this: Shall these voracious plunderers be allowed to consume their prey and cast in their empty net again and again?

Barnes paraphrases the text this way: *"Shall he empty it? Shall he then devour those whom he has caught? and so cast his emptied net again unceasingly, pitilessly, to slay the nations?" This question he answers in the next chapter - A Deliverer will come!*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen. (Philippians 4:23).