

The Mystery of History  
Habakkuk 1:1 – 11

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Book of Habakkuk is as modern as the twentieth century. It is a book for today. It is contemporary. Habakkuk deals with the question, “Is God in charge of history?” We all have questions about the beginning, process and end of history. Why is there evil? How can I believe in a personal, loving God if He allows bad things to happen to me and others? What is the meaning of history? Why is the world in such a mess if there is a God? These questions are all answered in this small but potent prophecy of Habakkuk.
- B. Habakkuk not only shows us God’s dealings with the elect but also the non-elect. This book declares uncompromisingly that God has a plan for unbelievers as well as believers. God truly is in control of all history. Therefore, we can conclude He controls the histories of individual Christians and non-Christians. The Book of Habakkuk and the Bible not only tell about personal salvation, but it tells us about the destiny of the entire world. It presents a profound view of history, a distinctive world view. ILLUSTRATION: It is said that Benjamin Franklin read Habakkuk to a literary group in Paris and provoked the greatest enthusiasm for this unknown author among them.

II. IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROPHET (1:1): *“The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet received.”*

- A. Habakkuk in the Hebrew means “embracer” or “wrestler.” Some have suggested that he was a man who wrestled with God over the basic intellectual questions. Others suggest he was embraced by God, a lover of God which in turn allowed the prophet to embrace his people in love, granting the true believers in Judah comfort.
- B. Habakkuk must have been a cultured and educated prophet. The book is written in excellent classical Hebrew and is characterized by vigor, animation and dignity. We believe Habakkuk was a member of the Temple orchestra, probably the music director. *“For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.” (Hab. 3:19)* This whole prophecy was set to music so it was quite moving for those who heard it.
- C. No one knows for sure the exact date of the Book of Habakkuk. It was probably written after the fall of Nineveh, the capitol of Assyria, to the Babylonians in 612 B.C. and before the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 B.C. Habakkuk probably wrote somewhere in the middle of that twenty-five year period. We can assume that Habakkuk was a mature man when he prophesied. Therefore, he must have spent his childhood in Judah during the reign of King Josiah. When Josiah was sixteen, he began a religious reform which deeply affected the religious life of Judah. It was a reform, however, from the top down rather than from the bottom up. Josiah died on the battlefield against Pharaoh Neco of Egypt on the plain of Megiddo in 609 B.C. Then the wicked King Jehoakim came to power and reigned from 608-598 B.C. The nation of Judah reverted to massive spiritual and moral decay. Disillusionment had set in for the prophet Habakkuk and for the elect remnant in Judah. Habakkuk made this prophecy under these deteriorating, disillusioning, debilitating days in the life of a crumbling nation.

D. It is said that Habakkuk spoke an “oracle” or “burden” because it predicts judgment on Judah and its enemies.

### III HABAKKUK’S COMPLAINT (1:2-4)

A. Indifference Of God To His Prayers (1:2): ***“How long, O LORD, must I call for help but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save?”***

1. This prophecy is different than any other Minor Prophet because it is a conversation between God and the prophet. This is a cry of anguish from a man who loved justice. Habakkuk had a problem about the being and character of God. He was a troubled man, and he wanted to harmonize what he saw in Judah and what he believed about God. He saw Judah backslidden. The nation had turned from and for God. The elect people had given themselves over to false gods and ungodly pursuits. The prophet wanted to know how God could tolerate this and still be God. Was God dead? Why was He silent? Perhaps God doesn’t answer prayer.
2. The prophet looked over Judah and cried, “Violence!” He saw murder, muggings, rapes, and brutality everywhere. Political and social upheaval and every kind of oppression were the rule of the day. God seemed to be doing nothing about the godlessness in the land. God seemed strangely silent and unconcerned for Judah and the prophet. NOTE: Habakkuk was wrestling with the problem as to whether God really answers prayer and whether He really cares about human suffering. He was disturbed as to whether God was truly sovereign.
3. Notice Habakkuk knew where to take his complaints and even his theological doubts. He took them to God. He did not go to other prophets or theologians. He did not dump on a counselor or his friends but he took his complaint to God. The Psalmist did the very same thing. ***“I cry aloud to the LORD; I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy. I pour out my complaint before him; before him I tell my trouble. (Psa. 140:1, 2)***

B. Inactivity Of God Towards Evil (1:3): ***“Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence is before me; there strife and conflict abounds.”***

1. The first question was “how long?” The next was “why?” The prophet moved from discouragement to doubting the very motives of God. He saw injustice – oppression of the poor, falsehood, vanity, idolatry, distrust, quarreling and disputes running rampant. The prophet is saying, “If you are an all-wise, all-living, all-powerful God, why do you allow evil? Why don’t you do something about it? After all, Israel is your elect nation.” Habakkuk reasoned, as many who have said as they looked over the miseries of the world, either God has the power and does not care or He cares and does not have the power. Both are wrong, for God does care and God does have the power, but God does have a plan. What Habakkuk was doing was charging God with inactivity or inability.
2. How many of us have said, “Why God do You allow liberalism and modernism in the church? Why do You allow evangelicals to fight and squabble? Why do You allow so many wrong things to be done in Your name? Why don’t You strike blasphemers within the church dead? Why haven’t You answered my prayers for the salvation of a loved one? Why? Why? Why?”

- C. Injustice Of His People (1:4): ***“Therefore, the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.”***
1. In all of Judah, the Mosaic Law was of no effect. Literally, this says the law was “frozen” or “chilled.” Wickedness numbs the Word of God. Law was on the books but it was not enforced. Law had no authority. Because of unrighteous judges, the Law was made ineffective.
  2. In our own nation of the U.S.A., we see how law is perverted, twisted and set aside. Murder, theft, prostitution, illegal drugs, tax evasion, child abuse and a thousand other social ills seem to spread like wildfire. It is true that Israel was an elect nation and unique in that sense, but America is supposed to be a “so-called” Christian nation. Our situation in the U.S.A. is similar to what Habakkuk saw, for the human heart away from God, in Judah or the U.S.A., is capable of all kinds of lawlessness.

#### IV GOD’S REPLY (1:5-11)

- A. Invader Appointed (1:5): ***“Look at the nations and watch – and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”***
1. Habakkuk must have waited a good while for an answer, but at last the Lord did respond. But the answer was not what Habakkuk had expected. The answer of God did not solve Habakkuk’s problem. In fact, it actually gave him greater problems than he had previously. NOTE: God does not answer the question “why” for Habakkuk, but just says “what” is going to happen. The Lord is the sovereign I AM THAT I AM. He owes no apology and no explanation of the whys and the wherefores of His ways and actions to anyone. He always remains the Lord of unwavering justice and unchanging grace, even though we cannot understand His dealings with mankind.
  2. God told Habakkuk to look at the nations surrounding Judah and he will be amazed, shocked and shudder, for the work God was about to do was incredible. This work will be so horrifying that the nation of Judah simply won’t believe it. God would raise up the Babylonians, overthrow Jerusalem, capture Judah and take the Israelites into captivity, being driven off the land which God gave to them.
  3. Perhaps God told them to “look” and “watch” because He wanted them to be frightened so as to produce repentance in the nation. Perhaps Jerusalem could be saved if the people would right their hearts before God. Egypt could not help them. Their armies could not help them. Their diplomacy could not help them. Their foreign alliances could not help them. The only one who could help them was Jehovah God. They needed to claim God’s promise. ***“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” (II Chron. 7:14).***
- B. Invader Identified (1:6): ***“I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own.”***
1. God told Habakkuk He was raising up the godless, idolatrous, wicked Babylonians to do this incredible work of chastising Israel for its sin. They were a ruthless, cruel, bitter and impetuous people, who had risen to power

in a very short time. The Babylonian army had the military tactic of fanning out over a large territory, destroying and plundering everything in its way. They very seldom fought pitched battles. They were always on the move. NOTE: Habakkuk was convinced God needed to chastise Judah. He also thought that after the discipline, God would bring revival to the land. But when God said that the Babylonians would come and capture the land, Habakkuk could not believe it. This is the very last thing he would imagine God would do. The lesson is obvious. God often gives unexpected answers to prayer. God sometimes answers our prayers in such a way that things get worse before they get better. He sometimes does just the opposite of what we anticipate. The life of faith, however, is always prepared to deal with the unexpected. ILLUSTRATION: John Newton, the author of the hymn “Amazing Grace”, wanted something better in his spiritual life than he was presently experiencing. He cried out for a deeper knowledge of God. In anticipation, he expected God to do something supernatural and great. But instead, he went into deep depression. He, for months and months, was cast by God into such utter despair and blackness that he thought for a time that he was under the control of Satan. He was tempted and tried beyond comprehension. However, this depressing experience was what God used to bring Newton into a deeper spiritual understanding of his God. God answered Newton’s prayers, but not the way he thought God would answer them.

2. This verse tells us that God uses strange instruments to get His task accomplished. It was unthinkable that God would use the Babylonians to chastise the people of God. But God can use whatever He pleases to discipline His people. ***“Therefore the LORD Almighty says this: “Because you have not listened to my words, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon,” declares the LORD, “and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin. I will banish from them the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, the sound of millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole country will become desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.” (Jer. 25:8-11)*** NOTE: Look at godless, atheistic Communism today. God is using this wicked instrument to deal with His people, the Church of Jesus Christ.
3. We see very clearly from this verse that history is under God’s sovereign control. It was God who raised up the Babylonians – ***“I am raising up the Babylonians.”*** Every nation on earth is under the hand of God, for there is no power in this world which is not ultimately under His control. It was not the military might of Babylon and the dynamic leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar that brought these people to power. It was God, for He had a work for them to do. God is the Lord of history. ***“Surely the nations are like a drop in the bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales . . . Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing . . . He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers . . . He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.” (Isa. 40:15, 17, 22, 23)*** God

is over all. He started the historical process; He is controlling it and He will end it. It is God who has the solution to the mystery of history. Someone has said that “history is His-story.” ILLUSTRATION: John Calvin, commenting on this verse, says, “Thus we see that the worst of men are in God’s hand, as Satan is, who is their head; and yet that God is not implicated in their wickedness, as some insane men maintain; for they say – That if God governs the world by His providence, He becomes thus the author of sin, and men’s sins are to be ascribed to Him. But Scripture teaches us far otherwise, - that the wicked are led here and there by the hidden power of God, and that yet the fault is in them, when they do anything in a deceitful and cruel manner, and that God ever remains just, whatever use He may make of instruments, yea, the very worst.

4. This verse tells us that things just don’t happen. There is no such thing as chance in this world. Events are not accidental, but there is a definite plan of history known only to Him who sees the beginning from the ending. All events are controlled by God. ***“He sets up kings and deposes them.” (Dan. 2:21)*** NOTE: What is happening in the twentieth century is not out of control. Things are going according to plan. In the Old Testament God’s plan centered around physical Israel. In the New Testament, God’s plan centers around the Church, the spiritual Israel of God. Put the Church at the center of history and it all makes sense.

C. Invader Described (1:7-9): ***“They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. Their horses are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops headlong; their horsemen come from afar. They fly like a vulture swooping to devour; they all come bent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like sand.”***

1. The Babylonians recognized no law but their own might. Their cavalry swiftly, with agility and mobility, overran a country, looting, raping, killing, spreading terror, horror and panic. The cavalry would then be followed by the fierce infantry which rolled on as a death-dealing machine. They carried on murderous raids as ravenous evening wolves kill their prey. Distance is no obstacle to them. Like the vulture they see their prey from incredible distances so they can hasten to kill and eat it. The Babylonians relentlessly pushed on, gathering innumerable prisoners which they made slaves. NOTE: Notice the Babylonians brought “violence” to the land because the Israelites were guilty of “violence” in the land (Hab.1:2). God punished violence with violence.
2. Imagine how this must have struck fear into the hearts of the people when they heard this but still they would not repent. They closed their minds, stopped up their ears and hardened their hearts. They probably rationalized this way, “A loving God wouldn’t do anything that horrible. There is no real danger. Don’t listen to Habakkuk. These prophets are always alarmists, threatening people with fear tactics. Surely God wouldn’t use the wicked Babylonians to chastise the righteous of Israel.” How little they really understood God.

D. Invader’s Insolence (1:10): ***“They deride kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities; they build earthen ramps and capture them.”***

The Babylonians were proud, arrogant and bold, ridiculing kings and rulers. They had devised a new way of taking what seemed to be impregnable cities. Instead of scaling the fortified walls, they piled up dirt, making a ramp so they could come over the wall. A soldier, instead of carrying a weapon, would carry a bucket and a shield. When the ramp was complete, horses, chariots, and infantry would pour over the wall, leaving the city defenseless. NOTE: We know the Bible teaches that pride goes before destruction, and God would deal with Babylon in His own timing.

- E. Invader's Ignorance (1:11): ***“Then they sweep past like the wind and go on – guilty men whose own strength is their god.”***

Drunk with success, the Babylonians deified themselves. They believed their military might and power was their god. Nebuchadnezzar built for his own glory, not for the glory of God. For Nebuchadnezzar, this was committing suicide of the soul. ***“He said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan. 4:30)***

## V. CONCLUSION

- A. Saved. What lessons does God want us to learn from this message? First, God is in control of history, and nothing is happening in this world except by divine design. We may not understand just as Habakkuk did not understand, but the mystery of history is guided by the God of history. Second, history for us can be put together if we put the Church at the center. All history revolves around spiritual Israel, the Church. We should be able to recognize the signs of the times by recognizing what God is doing with the Church. Third, if we must complain, let us complain to God. Fourth, the God who is in control of History is also in control of our lives as Christians. We must learn to rest our circumstances, over which we have no control, into God's hands. Someone said, “Make your plans with a pencil so that God can rub them out.” Fifth, God's ways are often mysterious. His actions puzzle us. His answers to prayer are often unexpected. He uses strange instruments to accomplish His purposes. Sixth, since God controls history, everything which is happening to us is happening for a purpose. We should ask ourselves, “What is God trying to teach me? What does God want corrected in me? What does God want me to learn about His character in this situation?” ILLUSTRATION: When things happen to us which we do not understand, Andrew Murray suggests “The Four Anchors” which will give us contentment in the situation: 1) I am here by God's appointment; 2) I am here in His keeping, so I am surrounded by His love, and He will give me grace to behave as His child; 3) While I'm here, I am under God's training to teach me the lessons I am to learn; and 4) I am here for God's time and He will bring me out again – how and when He alone knows.

- B. Unsaved

1. This section of Scripture tells us that God is guiding history to a final end. We know from the New Testament that the final end is the second coming of Christ. God has a plan for nations and individuals. He has a plan for the elect and the non-elect. God will save those He chooses to save according to the counsel of His sovereign will.
2. Who will God save? All who trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Those who yield to Christ will enter into a positive, meaningful, spiritual experience and will begin to understand something about the mystery of

history. They will come to grasp that God does have a plan for this world and a plan for the Church.

3. Believe in Christ and you will understand that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.