

Habakkuk

Title and Writer

The title of the book is the name of its writer.

Little is known about Habakkuk. All we know for sure about Habakkuk was that he was a prophet who lived during the pre-exilic period of Israel's history, and that he was a contemporary of Jeremiah and a man of vigorous faith rooted deeply in the traditions of Israel.

The meaning of his name is questionable. It may come from the Hebrew verb *habaq*, which means "to fold the hands" or "to embrace." In this case it might mean "one who embraces" or "one who is embraced." Luther thought it signified that Habakkuk embraced his people to comfort and uphold them. Jerome interpreted it to mean that he embraced the problem of divine justice in the world, the subject of the book. The simple designation "the prophet" with no other identifying description characterizes only two other prophetic books: Haggai and Zechariah. So Habakkuk is the only book so designated among the pre-exilic Prophets. The content of the book, which includes wisdom literature and a psalm of praise, indicates that Habakkuk was a poet as well as a prophet.

The New Testament writers told us nothing about the prophet. There are traditions about who Habakkuk was that have little basis in fact but are interesting nonetheless. Since the last verse of the book gives a musical notation similar to some psalms, some students concluded that he was a musician and possibly a Levite. The Septuagint addition to the Book of Daniel, the apocryphal *Bel and the Dragon*, mentions Habakkuk in its title as the son of Jeshua of the tribe of Levi. It records a legend about him that is pure fantasy.

Supposedly an angel commanded Habakkuk to take a meal to Daniel, who was in the lions' den a second time. When the prophet complained that he did not know where the den was, the angel picked him up by a lock of his hair and carried him to the spot (*Bel and the Dragon* verses 33-39).

According to rabbinic sources, Habakkuk was the son of the Shunammite woman whom Elisha restored to life (2 Kings 4). The basis for this theory is that Elisha's servant told the woman that she would "embrace" a son (2 Kings 4:16), and Habakkuk's name is similar to the Hebrew word for "embrace."

Unity

The major challenge to the unity of the book has come from liberal scholars who view psalmic material such as chapter 3 as post-exilic. The commentary on Habakkuk found at Qumran does not expound this psalm, either. However, the

continuity of theme that continues throughout the whole book plus the absence of any compelling reasons to reject chapter 3 argue for the book's unity.

Date of Writing

References in the book help us date it approximately but make it impossible to be precise or dogmatic. The Lord told Habakkuk that He was raising up the Chaldeans (Neo-Babylonians), the fierce and impetuous people who were already marching through the whole Earth, and that they would expand their territory even farther (Habakkuk 1:6). This points to a time before 605 BC when Babylon defeated the united forces of Egypt and Assyria at the battle of Carchemish and became the major power in the ancient Near East. It may even point to a time before 612 BC when the Babylonians (with the Medes and Scythians) destroyed Nineveh. However, other references in the book that describe conditions in Judah and the ancient Near East support a date between 608 and 605 BC (cf. 1:7-11). King Jehoiakim ruled Judah from 609-598 BC, so it was apparently during his reign that Habakkuk prophesied (see 2 Kings 23:36 – 24:7 and 2 Chronicles 36:5-8).

The background to Habakkuk is the decline of the Judean kingdom that began with the death of King Josiah in 609 BC. On the one hand, Habakkuk announced the Babylonians' rise to prominence as if it would be a surprise (Habakkuk 1:5-6), but on the other hand, the prophecy seems to assume the Babylonians had already built a reputation as an imperialistic power (see Habakkuk 1:6-11, Habakkuk 1:15-17; Habakkuk 2:5-17). Some have suggested that perhaps the best way to resolve the problem is to understand the book as a collection of messages from different periods in the prophet's career.

The prediction of the coming Babylonian invasion (Habakkuk 1:6) seems to indicate that Habakkuk lived in Judah toward the end of King Josiah's reign (640-609 BC) or at the beginning of King Jehoiakim's reign (609-598 BC). The prophecy generally is dated a little before or after the battle of Carchemish (605 BC), when Egyptian forces, who had earlier gone to the aid of the last Assyrian king, were routed by the Babylonians under Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar and were pursued as far as the Egyptian border (Jeremiah 46). Habakkuk, like Jeremiah, probably lived to see the initial fulfillment of his prophecy when Jerusalem was attacked by the Babylonians in 597.

Place of Composition

Since the Chaldeans were on the rise when Habakkuk wrote, the prophet must have lived in Judah. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had passed out of existence in 722 BC with the Assyrian invasion. Thus, Habakkuk was a prophet of the Southern Kingdom who lived in times of increasing degeneracy and fear.

Audience and Purpose

The people to whom Habakkuk ministered were Judeans who apparently lived under the reign of King Jehoiakim. During his reign the Israelites were looking for help in the wrong places, such as Egypt and Assyria, in view of growing Babylonian power. They should have been looking to the Lord primarily, and their failure to do so was one of the burdens of Jeremiah, Habakkuk's contemporary. Habakkuk's concerns were more philosophical, however. What disturbed him was that the sovereign Lord was not responding to Habakkuk's evil generation and its internal injustices. He voiced his concern to Yahweh in prayer (Habakkuk 1:2-4). The Lord replied that He was working. He was raising up a nation that would punish His people for their covenant unfaithfulness (Habakkuk 1:5-11). This raised another problem for Habakkuk, which he also took to the Lord in prayer. How could He use a wicked nation than Judah to punish God's chosen people (Habakkuk 1:12 – Habakkuk 2:1)? The Lord explained that He would eventually punish the Babylonians for their wickedness, too (Habakkuk 2:2-20).

The final chapter is a hymn of praise extolling Yahweh for His wise ways. The purpose of the book, then, was to vindicate the justice of God so God's people would have hope and encouragement.

Literary Form

This book employs a variety of literary forms. The first part of the book contains a dialogue between Habakkuk and his God that alternates between lament and oracle (Habakkuk 1:2 – Habakkuk 2:5). The second part is a taunt or mocking song that the prophet put in the mouths of the nations that had suffered under Babylon's oppression. It consists of five "woes" (Habakkuk 2:6-20). The third part is a psalm, complete with musical directions (chapter 3).

Distinctive Features

Habakkuk is a unique book. Unlike other prophets who declared God's message to people, this prophet dialogued with God about people. Most Old Testament prophets proclaimed divine judgment. Habakkuk pleaded **for** divine judgment. In contrast with the typical indictment, this little book records an intriguing interchange between a perplexed prophet and his Maker.

The prophet asked some of the most penetrating questions in all literature, and the answers are basic to a proper view of God and his relation to history. If God's initial response sounded the death knell for any strictly nationalistic covenant theology of Judah, His second reply outlined in a positive sense the fact that all history was hastening to a conclusion that was as certain as it was satisfying.

In the interim, while history is still awaiting its conclusion (and Habakkuk was not told when the end would come, apparently for him prefigured by Babylon's destruction), the righteous ones are to live by faith. The faith prescribed – or “faithfulness,” as many have argued that *'emunah* should be translated – is still called for as a basic response to the unanswered questions in today's universe; and it is this, a theology for life both then and now, that stands as Habakkuk's most basic contribution.

Outline of the Book of Habakkuk

I. Heading 1:1

II. Habakkuk's questions and Yahweh's answers 1:2 – 2:20

A. Habakkuk's question about Judah 1:2-4

B. Yahweh's answer about Judah 1:5-11

C. Habakkuk's question about Babylonia 1:12-17

D. Yahweh's answer about Babylonia chapter 2

1. The introduction to the answer 2:1-3

2. The Lord's indictment of Babylon 2:4-5

3. The Lord's sentence on Babylon 2:6-20

III. Habakkuk's hymn in praise of Yahweh chapter 3

A. The introduction to the hymn 3:1

B. The prayer for revival 3:2

C. The vision of God 3:3-15

1. Yahweh's awesome appearance 3:3-7

2. Yahweh's angry actions 3:8-15

D. The commitment of faith 3:16-19a

E. The concluding musical notation 3:19b

Habakkuk 1

1. *The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw.*
2. *“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and You will not hear? Or cry to You ‘Violence!’ and You will not save?”*
3. *“Why do You make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.*
4. *“So the law is slacked and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted.”*
5. *“Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.*
6. *“For lo, I am rousing the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the Earth, to seize habitations not their own.*
7. *“Dread and terrible are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.*
8. *“Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Yes, their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour.*
9. *“They all come for violence; terror of them goes before them. They gather captives like sand.*
10. *“At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport. They laugh at every fortress, for they heap up earth and take it.*
11. *“Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!”*
12. *“Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, You have ordained them as a judgment; and You, O Rock, have established them for chastisement.*
13. *“You Who are of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wrong, why do You look on faithless men, and are silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?”*
14. *“For You make men like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler.*
15. *“He brings all of them up with a hook, he drags them out with his net, he gathers them in his seine; so he rejoices and exults.*
16. *“Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his seine; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich.*
17. *“Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and mercilessly slaying nations forever?”*

1:1. *The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw.*

The writer described this book as an oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw in a vision or dream. This burden (Hebrew *massa*’, something lifted up) was a message predicting judgment on Judah and Babylon.

Habakkuk's prophecy possesses a burdensome dimension from start to finish.

We know nothing more about Habakkuk than that he was a prophet who also had the ability to write poetry, as will be seen in chapter 3.

Like Haggai and Zechariah in the books that bear their names, Habakkuk is called *the* prophet. This may mean that Habakkuk was a professional prophet on the temple staff, but we do not know for sure.

One of the functions of temple prophets was to give responses to worshipers who came seeking divine guidance. Once the problem was stated, the prophet inquired of God and obtained an answer.

Habakkuk's Questions and Yahweh's Answers 1:2 – 2:20

Habakkuk's Question About Judah 1:2-4

This section is a lament and is similar to many psalms of lament, such as Psalm 6:3; Psalm 10:1-13; Psalm 13:1-4; Psalm 22:1-21; Psalm 74:1-11; Psalm 80:4; Psalm 88:1-18; Psalm 89:46; Jeremiah 12:4; and Zechariah 1:12.

1:2. *“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and You will not hear? Or cry to You ‘Violence!’ and You will not save?”*

In prayer the prophet asked Yahweh "how long" would he have to call for help before the Lord responded (see Habakkuk 2:6; Exodus 16:28; and Numbers 14:11). God hears all prayers because He is omniscient, but Habakkuk meant that God had not given evidence of hearing by responding to his prayer. He had cried out to the Lord reminding Him of the violence that he observed in Judah, but the Lord had not provided deliverance (see Genesis 6:11; Genesis 6:13; and Job 19:7). God had apparently not heard, and He certainly had not helped the prophet.

1:3. *Why do You make me see wrongs and look upon trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.*

Habakkuk wanted to know why Yahweh allowed the iniquity and wickedness that he had to observe every day to continue in Judah. Destruction, ethical wrong, strife, and contention were not only common, but they were increasing. Yet Yahweh did nothing about the situation.

This is not an instance of the earthen vessel finding fault with the Potter Who made it – an attitude rebuked by Isaiah and Paul. It is to the one who answers back in unbelief that Paul says, ***“Who indeed are you . . . to argue with God?”*** (Romans 9:20). But there are others who answer back in faith; their words, when they do so, are the expression of their loyalty to God. Such seems to be the case with Habakkuk.

1:4. *So the law is slacked and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth perverted.*

Since God had not intervened to stem the tide of evil, as He had threatened to do in the Mosaic Law, the Judeans were ignoring His law. They did not practice justice in their courts, the wicked dominated the righteous, and the powerful perverted justice. These conditions were common in Judah.

It is clear from the Lord's reply that follows that others in the nation beside Habakkuk were praying these prayers and asking these questions. The prophet spoke for the godly remnant in Judah.

Yahweh's Answer About Judah 1:5-11

Though God had not responded to the prophet's questions previously, He did eventually, and Habakkuk recorded His answer. The form of this revelation is an oracle.

The hoped-for response to a lament as seen in verses 2-4 in chapter one would be an oracle of salvation, but what follows here is an oracle of judgment.

1:5. *Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.*

The Lord told Habakkuk and His people (plural "you" in Hebrew) to direct his attention away from what was happening in Judah to what was happening in the larger arena of ancient Near Eastern activity. They were to observe something there that would astonish them and make them marvel. They would see that God was doing something in their days that they would not believe if someone just told them about it.

The Apostle Paul, quoting from the LXX on this verse, applies the principle of God's dealings in Habakkuk's day to the situation in the church in his own day in Acts 13:41. No doubt God's work of calling the Gentiles into His church would be just as astonishing as His work of using the Babylonian armies to punish Judah.

1:6. *For lo, I am rousing the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the Earth, to seize habitations not their own.*

The Lord urged the prophet and His people to see that He was in the process of raising up the Chaldeans as a force and power in their world. The Neo-Babylonian Empire began its rise to world domination with the accession of Nabopolassar to the throne of Babylon in 626 BC. This aggressive king stimulated the Babylonians to become a ruthless and impetuous nation that had already marched through the ancient Near East and conquered several neighboring nations as is detailed in Ezekiel 28:7; Ezekiel 30:11; Ezekiel 31:12;

and Ezekiel 32:12. Thus Babylonia would be the rod of God's punishment of Judah as Assyria had been His instrument of judgment of Israel.

The seventh-century BC prophets depicted the Lord as the sovereign ruler over the nations. He is still so to this very day.

1:7. *Dread and terrible are they; their justice and dignity proceed from themselves.*

Many nations feared the Babylonians, who were a law unto themselves. They lived by rules that they made rather than those that were customary at the time. Similarly, the Third Reich called error truth and right wrong to suit its own purposes in the last century, and today we have Islamic terrorism that once again is a law unto themselves. Is it possible we are being punished for our rejection of the Lord as a people?

True or false: If God's people refuse to fear Him, they will ultimately be compelled to fear those less worthy of fear (see Deuteronomy 28:47-48; Deuteronomy 28:58-68; and Jeremiah 5:15-22).

The Jews of Habakkuk's day did not believe that God would allow the Gentiles to overrun their nation (see Jeremiah 5:12; Jeremiah 6:14; Jeremiah 7:1-34; Jeremiah 8:11; Lamentations 4:12; and Amos 6). Yet their law and their prophets warned them that this could happen (see Deuteronomy 28:49-50; 1 Kings 11:14, 1 Kings 11:23; Jeremiah 4; Jeremiah 5:14-17; Jeremiah 6:22-30; and Amos 6:14).

1:8. *Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Yea, their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour.*

The military armaments of the Babylonians were state of the art. Their horses, implements of war in the ancient world, were the swiftest, faster even than leopards, one of the fastest animals in the cat family. This may have been hyperbole. They were more eager to attack their enemies than wolves (see Jeremiah 5:6). Their mounted soldiers swooped down on their enemies as fast and unsuspected as an eagle (or vulture) plummeting from the sky to devour a small animal on the ground (see Jeremiah 5:17 and Lamentations 4:19). All three of these animals that God used for comparison with the Babylonians were excellent hunters, fast and fierce.

1:9. *They all come for violence; terror of them goes before them. They gather captives like sand.*

The Babylonians loved violence. The faces of their warriors showed their love for battle as they moved irresistibly forward in conquest. They were as effective at collecting captives from other countries as the sirocco winds from the East were

at driving dust before them (see Jeremiah 18:17; Ezekiel 17:10; Ezekiel 19:12; and Jonah 4:8). This enemy was advancing like a whirlwind and gathering captives as innumerable as the sand.

1:10. *At kings they scoff, and of rulers they make sport. They laugh at every fortress, for they heap up earth and take it.*

The kings and rulers of the lands they overran were no threat to them. They laughed at them and their fortified cities in contempt (see 2 Kings 25:7). They heaped up rubble to conquer fortifications; they did not need special machines but used whatever they found to build siege ramps to conquer them (see 2 Kings 19:32; Ezekiel 4:2).

1:11. *Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!*

The Babylonians would sweep through the ancient Near East like the wind and pass on from one doomed nation to the next. Yet Yahweh promised to hold them guilty because they worshipped power instead of the true God. This is the reason God would judge them.

God may seem to be strangely silent and inactive in provocative circumstances. He sometimes gives unexpected answers to our prayers. And He sometimes uses strange instruments to correct His people.

Habakkuk's Question About Babylonia 1:12-17

This section is another lament. It expresses the problem of excessive punishment.

1:12. *Are You not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, You have ordained them as a judgment; and You, O Rock, has established them for chastisement.*

Power was not Habakkuk's god; Yahweh was. The Lord's revelation of what He was doing in the prophet's day brought confidence to his heart and praise to his lips. With a rhetorical question, Habakkuk affirmed his belief that Yahweh, his God, the Holy One, was from everlasting (or antiquity). The implication is that Yahweh is the only true God and that history was unfolding as it was because the God Who created history was in charge of events (sovereign).

Habakkuk believed the Judeans would not perish completely because God had promised to preserve them forever (2 Samuel 7:16). The prophet now understood that Yahweh had appointed the Babylonians to judge the sinful Judeans. The God Who had been a Rock of security and safety for His people throughout their history had raised up this enemy to correct His people, not to annihilate them.

1:13. *You Who are of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wrong, why do You look on faithless men, and are silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?*

Because Yahweh was the Holy One, Habakkuk knew that He was too pure to look approvingly at evil nor could He favor wickedness. This was a basic tenet of Israel's faith (see Psalm 5:4; Psalm 34:16; and Psalm 34:21). But this raised another, more serious, problem in the prophet's mind. Why did the Lord then look approvingly on the treachery of the Babylonians? Why did He not reprove them and restrain them when the Babylonians slew people who were more righteous than they?

The prophet's first question (verses 2-4) arose out of an apparent inconsistency between God's actions and His character. He was a just God, but He was allowing sin in His people to go unpunished. His second question arose out of the same apparent inconsistency. Yahweh was a just God, but He was allowing terrible sinners to succeed and even permitted them to punish less serious sinners. These questions were an evidence of a perplexed faith, rather than a weak faith. Clearly Habakkuk had strong faith in God, but how God was exercising His sovereignty baffled him.

It is one thing to face the problems that confront everyone who believes in a good and omnipotent God and ask why things are so, or how they can be so. It is something quite different to question the Divine goodness or justice, or the very existence of God, simply because one cannot answer these questions.

1:14. *For You make men like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler.*

Habakkuk asked the Lord why He had made people like fish and other sea creatures that apparently have no ruler over them. This statement probably represents the prophet's most pointed accusation against the Almighty. In recognizing the sovereignty of God among the nations, he must conclude that God Himself is ultimately behind this massive maltreatment of humanity.

Big fish eat little fish, and bigger fish eat the big fish. The same thing was happening in Habakkuk's world. Babylon was gobbling up the smaller nations, and Yahweh was not intervening to establish justice.

1:15. *He brings all of them up with a hook, he drags them out with his net, he gathers them in his seine; so He rejoices and exults.*

1:16. *Therefore he sacrifices to his net and burns incense to his seine; for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich.*

Babylon was like a fisherman who took other nations captive with hook and net and rejoiced over his good catch. Babylonian monuments depict the Chaldeans

as having driven a hook through the lower lip of their captives and stringing them single file, like fish on a line. This was an Assyrian tradition that the Babylonians continued.

In another Babylonian relief, the Chaldeans pictured their major gods dragging a net in which their captured enemies squirmed. The Babylonians even gave credit to the tools they used to make their impressive conquests rather than to Yahweh (see verse 11). They had as little regard for human life as fishermen have for fish. That God would allow this to continue seemed blatantly unjust to the prophet.

Idolatry is not limited to those who bring sacrifices or burn incense to inanimate objects. People of position, power, and prosperity often pay homage to the business or agency that provided them their coveted status. It becomes their constant obsession, even their “god.”

1:17. *Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and mercilessly slaying nations forever?*

Habakkuk concluded his question by asking the Lord if the Babylonians would continue to carry on their evil practices without sparing anyone. Yahweh's policy of not interfering with Babylon's wickedness baffled Habakkuk more than His policy of not interfering with Judah's wickedness. It was Yahweh using a nation that practiced such excessive violence to judge the sins of His people that Habakkuk could not understand.

Habakkuk 2

1. *I will take my stand to watch, and station myself on the tower, and look forth to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.*

2. *And the Lord answered me: "Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it.*

3. *"For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end – it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.*

4. *"Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith.*

5. *"Moreover, wine is treacherous; the arrogant man shall not abide. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations, and collects as his own all peoples.*

6. *"Shall not all these take up their taunt against him, in scoffing derision of him, and say, 'Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own – for how long? – and loads himself with pledges!'*

7. *"Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be booty for them.*

8. ***“Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of men and violence to the Earth, to cities and all who dwell therein.***
9. ***“Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm!***
10. ***“You have devised shame to your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life.***
11. ***“For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond.***
12. ***“Woe to him who builds a town with blood, and founds a city on iniquity!***
13. ***“Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples labor only for fire, and nations weary themselves for nought?***
14. ***“For the Earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.***
15. ***“Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink of the cup of his wrath, and makes them drunk, to gaze on their shame!***
16. ***“You will be sated with contempt instead of glory. Drink, yourself, and stagger! The cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and shame will come upon your glory!***
17. ***“The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you; the destruction of the beasts will terrify you, for the blood of men and violence to the Earth, to cities and all who dwell therein.***
18. ***“What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For the workman trusts in his own creation when he makes dumb idols!***
19. ***“Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, ‘Awake’; to a dumb stone, ‘Arise!’ Can this give revelation? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it.***
20. ***“But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the Earth keep silence before Him.”***

Yahweh's Answer About Babylon Chapter 2

The Introduction to the Answer 2:1-3

2:1. I will take my stand to watch, and station myself on the tower, and look forth to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

Habakkuk compared himself to a sentinel on a city wall watching the horizon for the approach of a horseman. He purposed to watch and wait expectantly for the Lord to reply to this second question, as He had the first, so he could report it to his people (see Habakkuk 3:16). He prepared himself for a discussion with the Lord about the situation as well as for the Lord's answer that he expected in a vision or dream (see Job 13:3 and Job 23:4).

Only by revelation can the genuine perplexities of God's dealings with human beings be comprehended. Yahweh's response to those who inquire of Him is never automatic. They must be willing to wait in order to hear what God the Lord will speak. Psalm 85:9 says, ***“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.”***

2:2. And the Lord answered me: “Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it.”

Yahweh did respond and told the prophet to make a permanent, easy to read record of the vision, which He would give him, on tablets (of clay, stone, or metal; see Exodus 31:18; Exodus 32:15-16; Deuteronomy 9:10; and Deuteronomy 27:8). Having received and recorded the vision, Habakkuk, and other messengers, should then run to tell their fellow citizens what God's answer was. The matter was to be made so clear that whoever read it might run and publish it.

The interpretation of the Lord's command here could involve passers-by, who will be able to read the message as they go by and then pass the message on informally to those they meet, or it could mean a *herald*, whose specific function will be to spread the message throughout the land.

2:3. “For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end – it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.”

The vision Habakkuk was about to receive concerned events to take place in the future. Though it was a prophecy that would not come to pass immediately, it would materialize eventually. Habakkuk was to wait for its fulfillment because it would indeed come at the Lord's appointed time. This is a clear reminder to us all that we are on God's timetable. He is not on ours.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews quoted this verse in Hebrews 10:37. He used it to encourage his readers to persevere in their commitment to Jesus Christ since what God has predicted will eventually come to pass, specifically in the case of the Book of Hebrews, the Lord's return.

The Lord's Indictment of Babylon 2:4-5

Having prepared the prophet for His answer, the Lord now gave it. What follows must be that revelation.

2:4. “Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith.”

Proud Babylon was not right in doing what she did but was puffed up with pride and evil passions. In contrast, the righteous one will live by his faith (see Genesis 15:6). By implication, Babylon, the unrighteous one, would not live

because she did not live by faith (trust in God) but by sight and might. She sought to gratify her ambitions by running over other people rather than by submitting to God's sovereignty.

This verse appears three times in the New Testament. Paul quoted it in Romans 1:17 and emphasized **"righteous."** Faith in God results in righteousness for both Jews and Gentiles. Paul used it again in Galatians 3:11 but to stress **"live."** Rather than obtaining new life by obeying the Mosaic Law, the righteous person does so by faith. In Galatians Paul was addressing Gentiles mainly. The writer of Hebrews also quoted this verse in Hebrews 10:38, but his emphasis was on **"faith."** It is faith that God will reward in the righteous. In this case, the original readers were primarily Jews. In all three cases **"live"** has the broader reference to eternal life, but here it is mainly physical life that is in view. Thus, this verse is clearly an important revelation in the Bible, even its essential message.

It takes three books to explain and apply this one verse! This is the key verse in Habakkuk because it summarizes the difference between the proud Babylonians and their destruction with the humble faith of the Israelites and their deliverance. The issue is trust in God. **"The just shall live by his faith"** was the rallying cry of the Reformation, and they may well be the seven most important monosyllables in all of church history.

The underlying theme of the book may be summarized as follows: A matured faith trusts humbly but persistently in God's design for establishing righteousness in the Earth, regardless of the seemingly unending chaos the world seems to have.

Some scholars believe the theme of the book as the preservation of loyal trust in God in face of the challenge to faith presented by the bitter experience of foreign invasion and oppression. In many ways, the Book of Habakkuk is very much applicable in our day and time.

The word **"faith"** (Hebrew **'emunah**) can mean **"faithful"** or **"steadfast."** Did the Lord mean that the righteous will live by his trust in God or by being faithful to God? Scripture elsewhere reveals that both are true. However, in this context **"faith"** seems to be the meaning since the Babylonians did not trust God whereas the Israelites did. Both the Babylonians and the Israelites had been unfaithful to God.

The discrepancy between **"faith"** and "faithfulness" is more apparent than real, however. For man to be faithful in righteousness entails dependent trust in relation to God (see 1 Samuel 26:23-24); such an attitude is clearly demanded in the present context of waiting for deliverance (Habakkuk 2:3; Habakkuk 3:16-19). This is the first of three wonderful assurances that God gives in this chapter to encourage His people. This one emphasizes God's grace, because grace and faith always go together. Habakkuk 2:14 emphasizes God's glory and assures us that, though this world is now filled with violence and corruption (Genesis 6:5,

Genesis 6:11-13), it shall one day be filled with God's glory. The third assurance is in Habakkuk 2:20 and emphasizes God's government. Empires may rise and fall, but God is on His holy throne, and He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

2:5. “Moreover, wine is treacherous; the arrogant man shall not abide. His greed is as wide as Sheol; like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations, and collects as his own all peoples.”

The Lord advanced the thought of verse 4 further. When a person drinks too much wine it leads him to reveal his pride publicly. The Babylonians were known for their consumption of wine (see Daniel 5). Wine makes a person dissatisfied with his present situation and possessions, and he often leaves his home to find more elsewhere (see Proverbs 23:31-32). The proud person is never satisfied, like death that consumes people every day and never stops. Babylon was similar, opening wide its jaws to consume all peoples. The proud person also seeks to dominate others, and this, too, marked Babylon. These were the evidences of Babylon's pride and the basis of Yahweh's indictment of this nation (see Habakkuk 1:17).

Sheol is, in the Old Testament, the place to which the dead go. Often, therefore, it is spoken of as the equivalent of the grave, where all human activities cease; the terminus toward which all human life moves (see Genesis 42:38; Job 14:13; Psalm 88:3).

To the man “under the sun,” the natural man, who of necessity judges from appearances, **sheol** seems no more than the grave – the end and total cessation, not only of the activities of life, but also of life itself (Ecclesiastes 9:5, Ecclesiastes 9:10). But scripture reveals **sheol** as a place of sorrow (2 Samuel 22:6; Psalm 18:5; Psalm 116:3), into which the wicked are turned (Psalm 9:17), and where they are fully conscious (Isaiah 14:9-17; Ezekiel 32:21). Compare Jonah 2:2; what the belly of the great fish was to Jonah, **sheol** is to those who are therein. The **sheol** of the Old Testament and **hades** of the New Testament seem to be are identical.

The Lord's Sentence on Babylon 2:6-20

The Lord pronounced taunts or mocking statements on the Babylonians announcing that they would receive judgment for their sins. This taunt song consists of five stanzas of three verses each. Five woes follow. Each woe is an interjection of distress pronounced in the face of disaster or in view of coming judgment (see Isaiah 3:11; Isaiah 5:11; Isaiah 10:5; and others).

Judgment for Exploitation 2:6-8

2:6. ***“Shall not all these take up their taunt against him, in scoffing derision of him, and say, ‘Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own – for how long? – and loads himself with pledges!’”***

Because of the Babylonians' sins it was inevitable that the righteous would taunt and mock them. They would pronounce woe on them for increasing what was not theirs just to have more and for making themselves rich by charging exorbitant interest on loans. How long would this go on, they asked themselves (cf. Habakkuk 1:2). When would God judge Babylon?

2:7. ***“Will not your debtors suddenly arise, and those awake who will make you tremble? Then you will be booty for them.”***

Those from whom Babylon had stolen would surely rise up and rebel when they woke up to what was going on around them. Then they would turn the tables and Babylon would become plunder for them. This happened when the Medes and Persians rose up and overthrew Babylon in 539 BC.

2:8. ***“Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you, for the blood of men and violence to the Earth, to cities and all who dwell therein.”***

Babylon would suffer the same punishment it had inflicted on other nations. God is quite clear about this, as can be seen in the following verses:

“He who sows injustice will reap calamity, and the rod of his fury will fail.”
(Proverbs 22:8)

“Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.” (Galatians 6:7)

So however it may seem in this life, we know that in the long run no one gets away with anything. As Paul writes,

“For we shall all stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ; for it is written, ‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.’ So each of us shall give account of himself to God.” (Romans 14:10c-12)

So Babylon's survivors would loot it because it had looted other peoples. Babylon's pillaging had involved human bloodshed and ethical wrong

("violence") done to the land of Canaan and to the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants.

Judgment for Self-Exaltation 2:9-11

2:9. ***“Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm!”***

Babylon used its unjust acquisitions to build a secure place for itself that it thought would be safe from all calamities and harm. Does this remind you of any other Bible story? It reminds me of the story of the Tower of Babel.

“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole Earth.’” (Genesis 11:4)

Babylon built a strong and rich dynasty (house) so it would be self-sufficient. Saving to protect oneself from large future expenses is not wrong in itself, but to build a fortune so one will not have to trust in anyone else is saving with the wrong attitude. It is this attitude which is condemned by James in James 5:1-6:

“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the Earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned, you have killed the righteous man; he does not resist you.”

This attitude was also condemned by the Lord, James’s brother, Who said in Luke 12:16-21:

“The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.’” But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

2:10. ***“You have devised shame to your house by cutting off many peoples; you have forfeited your life.”***

It was shameful for the Babylonians to destroy other peoples (cf. verses 5, 8). By doing so they were sinning against themselves. That is, they were doing something that would eventually bring destruction on themselves.

2:11. *“For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond.”*

The stones and woodwork taken from other nations to build the Babylonians' fortresses and palaces would serve as visual witnesses to the sinful invasions that brought them to Babylon. They would testify to the guilt of the Babylonians in the day that Yahweh would bring Babylon to judgment. Ostentatious buildings and cities make statements about their builders.

Judgment for Oppression 2:12-14

2:12. *“Woe to him who builds a town with blood, and founds a city on iniquity!”*

The Babylonians could expect distress because they had built their cities at the expense of the lives of their enemies. We speak of "blood money" today as money obtained by making others suffer, even shedding their blood. Babylon was built with "blood money" and the blood, sweat, and tears of enslaved people. It was a town founded on injustice. Without injustice it could not have become what it had become.

2:13. *“Behold, is it not from the Lord of hosts that peoples labor only for fire, and nations weary themselves for nought?”*

This is the center of this taunt song structurally. It is significant that this verse focuses on almighty Yahweh, the Judge. His assessment was that the Babylonians' hard work was in vain; all their labor would amount to nothing. Their works would turn out to be fuel for fire that would burn them up, the fire of His judgment.

This is very reminiscent of Jeremiah 51:58, which says,

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘The broad wall of Babylon shall be leveled to the ground and her high gates shall be burned with fire. The peoples labor for nought, and the nations weary themselves only for fire.’”

2:14. *“For the Earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”*

Rather than the Earth being filled with the glory of Babylon, it will one day be filled with knowledge of God's glory, as comprehensively as the waters cover the sea. We see this same thought expressed in the following verses:

“but truly, as I live, and as all the Earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord,” (Numbers 14:21)

“Blessed be His glorious name forever; may His glory fill the whole Earth!” (Psalm 72:19)

“And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole Earth is full of His glory.’” (Isaiah 6:3)

“They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain; for the Earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:9)

“‘Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him?’ says the Lord. ‘Do I not fill Heaven and Earth?’ says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 23:24)

The Babylon in view in the Book of Habakkuk was mainly the Neo-Babylonian Empire, but ever since Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) "Babylon" had a symbolic meaning as well. It represented all ungodly peoples who rose up in self-reliance to glorify themselves and reach Heaven by their own works. This is why Rome is depicted as Babylon in the Book of Revelation. God destroyed the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 539 BC, but what Babylon represents will continue until God destroys it when Jesus Christ returns to the Earth to gather up His Bride, the church, comprised of the saved, to live with Him forever and ever.

Judgment for Rapacity 2:15-17

2:15. “Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink of the cup of his wrath, and makes them drunk, to gaze on their shame!”

God would judge Babylon because the Babylonians had deceived their neighbor nations with the result that they were able to take advantage of them. The Babylonians had behaved like a man who gets a woman drunk so she will lose her self-control and he can then undress her. That the Babylonians took advantage of their victims sexually is implied in the illustration, as is their love for wine.

2:16. “You will be sated with contempt instead of glory. Drink, yourself, and stagger! The cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and shame will come upon your glory!”

As they had made their neighbors drunk, so the Lord would give them a cup of judgment that would make them drunk. Yahweh's right hand is a figure for His strong personal retribution, giving back in kind what the person being judged had given. We can see this type of God's justice in the following verses as well:

17. ***“Rouse yourself, rouse yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of His wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl of staggering.***

18. ***“There is none to guide her among all the sons she has borne; there is none to take her by the hand among all the sons she has brought up.***

19. ***“These two things have befallen you – who will condole with you? – devastation and destruction, famine and sword; who will comfort you?***

20. ***“Your sons have fainted, they lie at the head of every street like an antelope in a net; they are full of the wrath of the Lord, the rebuke of your God.***

21. ***“Therefore hear this, you who are afflicted, who are drunk, but not with wine:***

22. ***“Thus says your Lord, the Lord, your God Who pleads the cause of His people: ‘Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering; the bowl of My wrath you shall drink no more;***

23. ***“and I will put it into the hand of your tormentors, who have said to you, ‘Bow down, that we may pass over’; and you have made your back like the ground and like the street for them to pass over.’”*** (Isaiah 51:17-23)

15. ***“Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: ‘Take from My hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it.***

16. ***“‘They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword which I am sending among them.’***

17. ***“So I took the cup from the Lord’s hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it:”*** (Jeremiah 25:15-17)

“Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, dweller in the land of Uz; but to you also the cup shall pass; you shall become drunk and strip yourself bare.” (Lamentations 4:21)

“But Jesus answered, ‘You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?’ They said to Him, ‘We are able.’” (Matthew 20:22)

“Again, for the second time, He went away and prayed, ‘My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, Your will be done.’” (Matthew 26:42)

“For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.” (1 Corinthians 11:29)

Having swallowed the cup's contents the Babylonians would disgrace themselves rather than honoring and glorifying themselves as they did presently. Their future disgrace contrasts with Yahweh's future glory (verse 14). They would expose their own nakedness as they had exposed the nakedness of others (verse 15).

Nakedness involves vulnerability as well as shame. Do you remember the story of Noah and his sons after that Flood in Genesis 9:20-25?

20. Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard;

21. and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent.

22. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside.

23. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness.

24. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him,

25. he said, "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers." (Genesis 9:20-25)

The Lord in Habakkuk pictured Babylon as a contemptible, naked drunk who had lost his self-control and the respect of everyone, including himself, very similar to what transpired with Noah.

2:17. "The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you; the destruction of the beasts will terrify you, for the blood of men and violence to the Earth, to cities and all who dwell therein."

Babylon's violence (ethical and moral injustice) would come back to cover him because he had rapaciously stripped Lebanon of its vegetation and animals. However, bloodshed in Lebanon's main town and the slaughter of its inhabitants was an even more serious crime. "Lebanon" is probably a synecdoche for Israel, as it is elsewhere (cf. 2 Kings 14:9; Jeremiah 22:6, 23), and "the town" most likely refers to Jerusalem.

The Creator of the world has a concern for what is nowadays called ecology; the cultural mandate that he has given to the human race includes the responsible stewardship of plant and animal life. But we must keep this stewardship in its proper place and context. We must not elevate the creation to that of the Creator, for that alone belongs to God, which is a good segue into the next section.

Judgment for Idolatry 2:18-20

2:18. "What profit is an idol when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies? For the workman trusts in his own creation when he makes dumb idols!"

Habakkuk, like other prophets, saw through the folly of idolatry and exposed it (cf. Isaiah 41:7; 44:9-20; 45:16, 20; 46:1-2, 6-7; Jeremiah 10:8-16). An idol carved by human hands cannot help its maker because anyone who creates is always greater than his creation. Images really become teachers of falsehood since their existence implies a lie, namely, that they can help humans. An idol-carver trusts his own handiwork by making it. Idols cannot even speak, much less provide help. As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:22-25,

**22. Claiming to be wise, they became fools,
23. and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles.
24. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,
25. because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, Who is blessed forever! Amen.**

Modern people in their sophistications may regard themselves as free from the obvious folly of idolatry. What educated, self-respecting person would be deluded into expecting special powers to emanate from the form of an antiquated idol? Yet the new covenant Scriptures make it plain that covetousness *is* idolatry. As the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians 5:5, **“Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.”** Whenever a person's desire looks to the creature rather than the Creator, he is guilty of the same kind of foolishness. An insatiable desire for things not rightly possessed assumes that things can satisfy rather than God himself. Whenever a person sets his priorities on the things made rather than on the Maker of things, he is guilty of idolatry.

Famous people are the 'idols' of millions, especially politicians, athletes, wealthy tycoons, and actors and actresses. Even dead entertainers such as Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Elvis Presley still have their followers. People may also worship and serve man-made things like cars, houses, boats, jewelry, and art. While all of us appreciate beautiful and useful things, it is one thing to own them and quite something else to be owned by them. Albert Schweitzer said, “Anything you have that you cannot give away, you do not really own; it owns you.” I've met people who so idolize their children and grandchildren that they refused to let them consider giving their lives for Christian service.

Social position can be an idol and so can vocation achievement. For some people, their god is their appetite. Look at what the Apostle Paul says about these types of people in Philippians 3:19 and Romans 16:18: **“Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded.”** They live only to experience carnal pleasures [including following their favorite teams?].

Intellectual ability can be a terrible idol as people worship their IQ and refuse to submit to God's word. As the Apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10:5, “. . . **casting down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. . . .**”

2:19. “Woe to him who says to a wooden thing, ‘Awake’; to a dumb stone, ‘Arise!’ Can this give revelation? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it.”

The Lord pronounced woe on those who ignorantly tried to coax their dumb idols, wood or stone perhaps overlaid with gold or silver, to speak (cf. 1 Kings 18:26-29). No matter what they looked like or out of what material they were made, they were still only lifeless objects of art. How foolish it was to look to one of these as one's teacher or guide!

2:20. “But the Lord is in His holy temple; let all the Earth keep silence before Him.”

In contrast to lifeless idols stands the living and true God. Yahweh lived in His heavenly temple, not in the works of human hands. Therefore all the Earth, and everything in it, should be quiet before Him out of respect and awe (fear; cf. v. 1; 3:16). There is no need to try and coax Him to come to life or to speak (cf. v. 19).

This contrasts with the frenetic activity of man to create 'speaking' gods, and the tumultuous cries of worshippers to make dumb idols respond. Lifeless idols approached in clamor are silent, while the living God, approached in silence and reverence, speaks. The implication of Yahweh's majestic sovereignty is that He would take care of Babylon; the Israelites did not have to concern themselves with that (cf. 3:16).

God sometimes uses evil people to accomplish His larger purpose in life. But He never condones evil, and those who do evil He still holds accountable for their actions. This verse provides a bridge to the next major section of the prophecy in that it turns to the positive, looking at God, after the negative, attention to Babylon's sin.

Habakkuk's Hymn In Praise of Yahweh Chapter 3

Having received the revelation that Yahweh would destroy Babylon, Habakkuk could understand that He was just in using that wicked nation to discipline Israel. Babylon would not go free but would perish for her sins. Israel's punishment, on the other hand, was only temporary (cf. 2 Samuel 7:16). This insight led Habakkuk to write the prayer of praise that concludes the book. It is one of the most moving statements of faith and trust found in Scripture.

This hymn is similar in language and imagery to Deuteronomy 33, Psalm 18:4-19, and Psalm 68. Its structure is chiasmic, as indicated by the headings below.

Habakkuk 3

- 1. A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.**
- 2. O Lord, I have heard the report of Thee, and Thy work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years renew it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.**
- 3. God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens, and the Earth was full of His praise. Selah**
- 4. His brightness was like the light, rays flashed from His hand; and there He veiled His power.**
- 5. Before Him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind.**
- 6. He stood and measured the Earth; He looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered, the everlasting hills sank low. His ways were as of old.**
- 7. I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.**
- 8. Was Thy wrath against the rivers, O Lord? Was Thy anger against the rivers, or Thy indignation against the sea, when Thou didst ride upon Thy horses, upon Thy chariot of victory?**
- 9. Thou didst strip the sheath from Thy bow, and put the arrows to the string. Selah. Thou didst cleave the Earth with rivers.**
- 10. The mountains saw Thee, and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice, it lifted its hands on high.**
- 11. The sun and moon stood still in their habitation at the light of Thine arrows as they sped, at the flash of Thy glittering spear.**
- 12. Thou didst stride the Earth in fury, Thou didst trample the nations in anger.**
- 13. Thou wentest forth for the salvation of Thy people, for the salvation of Thy anointed. Thou didst crush the head of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. Selah.**
- 14. Thou didst pierce with Thy shafts the head of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.**
- 15. Thou didst trample the sea with Thy horses, the surging of mighty waters.**
- 16. I hear, and my body trembles, my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones, my steps totter beneath me. I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.**
- 17. Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,**
- 18. yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.**

19. God, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like hinds' feet, He makes me tread upon my high places. To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.

The Introduction to the Hymn 3:1

3:1. A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionoth.

Habakkuk's prayer is hymnic in form, like many of the psalms (cf. Psalm 16; Psalm 30; Psalm 45; Psalm 88; Psalm 102; and Psalm 142), and it apparently stood apart from the rest of the book at one time, as this title verse suggests. "**Shigionoth**" may be the title of the tune that the prophet and later Israelites used to sing this song. But the Hebrew word is the plural form of the same word used in the title of Psalm 7, but nowhere else. "**Shiggaion**" evidently means a poem with intense feeling. So another view is that the Israelites were to sing it enthusiastically. The intense feeling, in both contexts where the word occurs, is a vehement cry for justice against sin.

The Prayer for Revival 3:2

3:2. O Lord, I have heard the report of Thee, and Thy work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years renew it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.

The prophet acknowledged that he had received the Lord's revelation (cf. Habakkuk 2:1). It was essentially a revelation of Yahweh, His justice, sovereignty, and power, and it had filled the prophet with awe. Reception of divine revelation resulted in the fear of the Lord.

Habakkuk called on God to stir up the work that He said He would do in judging Babylon. He asked God to make it known to His people "**in the midst of the years**," namely, the years between Judah's judgment and Babylon's (cf. Habakkuk 2:6-20). God undoubtedly did this in part through the Book of Habakkuk. While God was preparing Babylon for His wrath, Habakkuk asked Him to remember Israel by extending mercy to her. This verse contains the only petitions in Habakkuk's prayer: that God would preserve life, provide understanding, and remember mercy. Some readers have seen it as an encapsulation of the book's message.

The Vision of God 3:3-15

Habakkuk moved from petition to praise in his prayer. He recalled God's great power and pardon in bringing the Israelites from Egypt, through the wilderness, and into the Promised Land. Since God had done this, Habakkuk was confident

that He could and would deliver the Israelites from the Babylonians and reestablish them in the land.

Yahweh's Awesome Appearance 3:3-7

3:3. *God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens, and the Earth was full of His praise. Selah*

The prophet pictured Yahweh as rising over His people like the rising sun, appearing over Teman, a large town in Edom, and Mt. Paran, the mountain opposite Teman (cf. Deuteronomy 33:2-4). These locations were to the east of the Israelites as they exited Egypt.

The name for God used here, "Elohim," is in the singular, "Eloah," perhaps stressing the essential unity of God Who is the Holy One. "Selah" is another musical notation meaning "to lift up" (cf. verses 9 and 13). It probably indicates a place where the singers of this song were to pause. This pause may have been to modulate the key upward, to increase the volume, to reflect on what was just said, to exalt the Lord in some other way, or to raise an instrumental fanfare.

The Strong One's splendor covered the heavens like the sun after sunrise. The self-manifestation of His glory filled the Earth with His fame. "Glory" (Hebrew *hod*) describes primarily kingly authority (e.g., Numbers 27:20; 1 Chronicles 29:25; et al.), and here it has particular reference to Yahweh's sovereignty over creation and history. This is evidently a description of the Lord's appearance on Mt. Sinai to the Israelites' forefathers. Moses used similar terms to describe His coming then (cf. Deuteronomy 33:2).

3:4. *His brightness was like the light, rays flashed from His hand; and there He veiled His power.*

The radiance of the Holy One's glory was like the sunlight. Power seemed to flash from His fingertips as rays (literally horns) of light stretch from the rising sun (cf. Exodus 34:29-30, 35). In spite of this, most of His power remained concealed.

3:5. *Before Him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind.*

As God moves through the Earth, like the sun, He burns up what is in front of Him and chars what He leaves behind. Pestilence (literally burning heat) and plague (i.e., devastation) are the accompaniments, the results and evidences of His searing holiness.

In the ancient Near East, important people were accustomed to being accompanied by attendants (cf. 1 Samuel 17:7; 2 Samuel 15:1).

3:6. *He stood and measured the Earth; He looked and shook the nations; then the eternal mountains were scattered, the everlasting hills sank low. His ways were as of old.*

Standing like the sun at its zenith, God surveyed the whole Earth. His downward look, like sunrises, caused the nations to tremble. His glance was enough to make the permanent mountains shatter and the ancient hills collapse. He always causes these reactions since His ways are eternal.

What a contrast He is to lifeless idols (cf. Habakkuk 2:18-19)!

3:7. *I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.*

Habakkuk saw the semi-nomadic Ethiopians and Midianites, who lived on both sides of Mt. Sinai, trembling with fear because they witnessed something of Yahweh's power. Perhaps this is a reference to Yahweh parting the Red Sea. It is small wonder that these tribes trembled since His glance can cause mountains to melt (verse 6).

Yahweh's Angry Actions 3:8-15

Habakkuk now changed from describing the manifestation of God and the inanimate and animate reactions to it to a description of His acts on the Earth.

3:8. *Was Thy wrath against the rivers, O Lord? Was Thy anger against the rivers, or Thy indignation against the sea, when Thou didst ride upon Thy horses, upon Thy chariot of victory?*

With rhetorical questions Habakkuk affirmed that Yahweh was not angry with the (Nile and Jordan) rivers and the (Red) sea when He transformed them. He was demonstrating His power for the salvation of His people, as a divine warrior riding His chariot.

In Canaanite mythology, Baal had confronted the personified god Yam (sea), alternatively called Judge River. Israel borrowed this motif but dropped any idea that natural phenomena are personified deities. Yahweh is presented as having engaged in combat with the sea at creation or at other unspecified periods (cf. Job 26:12-13; Psalm 29; Psalm 89:9-10)

3:9. *Thou didst strip the sheath from Thy bow, and put the arrows to the string. Selah. Thou didst cleave the Earth with rivers.*

He pulled His powerful bow out and prepared to use it. He called for many arrows to shoot at His enemies (cf. Deuteronomy 32).

God had enlisted weapons and pledged them on oath for the destruction of His enemies.

In the ancient Near East, warriors would sometimes empower their weapons with a magical formula. The Lord is depicted here as doing the same (see also Jeremiah 47:6-7).

The prophet envisioned the rivers as God's instruments in dividing portions of the Earth.

3:10. *The mountains saw Thee, and writhed; the raging waters swept on; the deep gave forth its voice, it lifted its hands on high.*

Habakkuk personified the mountains and described them as shaking when they saw the Lord. Torrential rainstorms that resulted in flooding swept by Him (cf. Genesis 7:11, 19-20). The sea lifted up its waves like hands in response to His command (cf. Psalm 77:15-17, 20).

3:11. *The sun and moon stood still in their habitation at the light of Thine arrows as they sped, at the flash of Thy glittering spear.*

The sun and moon stood still at His word (cf. Joshua 10:12-13), and they paled when He sent forth flashes of lightning like arrows and shining spears (cf. Deuteronomy 32:23, 42).

3:12. *Thou didst bestride the Earth in fury, Thou didst trample the nations in anger.*

The Lord had marched through the Earth like a cosmic giant subduing Israel's enemies. He had trampled hostile nations as an ox does when it treads grain.

3:13. *Thou wentest forth for the salvation of Thy people, for the salvation of Thy anointed. Thou didst crush the head of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. Selah.*

He had gone forth as a warrior to save His people and to deliver His anointed one. This may refer to Moses in his battles with Israel's enemies, or it may refer to a coming anointed one: Cyrus (cf. Isaiah 45:1) or Messiah (cf. Psalm 2:2; Daniel 9:26), or more than one of these.

The first half of the verse provides the key to understanding the relationship of this chapter to the rest of the book. Rather than ignoring wrongdoing (Habakkuk 1:2-4), or allowing oppression of His people to go unpunished (Habakkuk 1:12-17), God remembers His covenant and acts on their behalf.

The whole purpose of the psalm and of God's theophany (appearance of God) is to indicate the continued presence of gracious care coupled with divine

judgment. Here we have God's answer to Habakkuk's complaints (Habakkuk 1:12-17) – His people will be saved.

The Lord had also smitten the leaders of many evil nations that opposed the Israelites, beginning with Pharaoh. He had disabled their nations as thoroughly as when someone slits a body open from bottom to top or tears a building off its foundation.

3:14. *Thou didst pierce with Thy shafts the head of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.*

The Lord used the weapons of His enemies to slay their leaders in retribution. Israel's enemies had stormed into the Promised Land with great enthusiasm to scatter God's people, like those who kill oppressed people in secret.

3:15. *Thou didst trample the sea with Thy horses, the surging of mighty waters.*

Yahweh had trodden down the Red Sea as though He rode through it on cosmic horses causing it to surge away and leave a dry road for His people to tread out of Egypt (cf. Habakkuk 3:8). This section closes with the motif with which it opened (3:8), namely, the crossing of the Red Sea.

The Commitment to Faith 3:16-19a

3:16. *I hear, and my body trembles, my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones, my steps totter beneath me. I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.*

Habakkuk trembled all over as he waited for the day of Babylon's invasion of Judah, the day of her distress. He could do nothing but wait patiently for the Babylonians to grow stronger and for judgment to come on Israel.

It is a terrible feeling to know that calamity is coming but that one can do nothing to prevent it. He could endure the prospect because he remembered that the omnipotent God of Israel had consistently defended her in the past and promised to do so in the future. Earlier when the prophet heard about the powerful Babylonians, he wanted to talk with God (Habakkuk 2:1). But now, having been reminded of the infinitely more powerful Yahweh, he had nothing more to say (cf. Job 42:1-6). God would handle the Babylonians. All Habakkuk had to do was wait.

Over the years, I have known of several people who have leaned often on three verses that have helped them wait patiently on the Lord. **“Stand still”** (Exodus 14:13), **“Sit still”** (Ruth 3:18), and **“Be still”** (Psalm 46:10).

Whenever we find ourselves getting 'churned up' within, we can be sure that we need to stop, pray, and wait on the Lord before we do some stupid thing.

3:17. *Though the fig tree do not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,*

3:18. *yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*

Even though everything would get worse in Judah, Habakkuk determined to praise Yahweh and to rejoice in the God Who would save him (cf. Psalm 18:46; Psalm 25:5). The prophet pictured the worst of circumstances by using a variety of rural metaphors drawn from plant and animal life. Taken together they have the effect of saying that no matter what bad thing may happen, Habakkuk, and hopefully all Israel, would trust God. Even though the prophet felt weak physically, he was strong in faith spiritually. Thus, he would live (cf. Habakkuk 2:4). Many of these bad conditions did mark Judah when the Babylonians overthrew the nation (cf. Lamentations 2:12, 20; Lamentations 4:4, 9-10; Lamentations 5:17-18).

It is right and proper to voice appreciation of God's goodness when He bestows all that is necessary for life, health, and prosperity. But when these things are lacking, to rejoice in God for His own sake is evidence of pure faith.

3:19a. *God, the Lord, is my strength; He makes my feet like hinds' feet, He makes me tread upon my high places.*

Sovereign Yahweh, Habakkuk's master, was the source of his strength, even though the prophet's legs shook (Habakkuk 3:16). He enabled His servant to walk through the perilous valley he faced as sure-footedly as the hoofs of a gazelle enabled it to navigate precipitous places (cf. Deuteronomy 32:13; Deuteronomy 33:29; 2 Samuel 22:34; Psalm 18:32-33, 39).

This statement of strong confidence contrasts with the prophet's doubts and fears out of which he spoke at the beginning of this book (Habakkuk 1:2-4). A revelation from God, and Habakkuk's decision to believe what God revealed, turned his attitude around.

Habakkuk was about to 'go under' when he started this book. Destruction, violence, strife, conflict, injustice, and wickedness were all he could see. But he cried out to God and his cry did not go unheeded. The Lord not only answered his complaint but also provided the confidence needed to lift him from the quagmire. Habakkuk started in the pits, but ended on the mountaintop. His journey was not exactly an easy one, but it was certainly worth it.

Essential elements in true prayer that are obvious in Habakkuk's prayer include humiliation, adoration, and petition.

The Concluding Musical Notation 3:19b

3:19b. *To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.*

The final footnote to this book gives direction to the choir director who used this chapter as part of Israel's formal worship. Habakkuk specified the use of stringed instruments to accompany the singing possibly because they set the proper mood.

The book opened with a dialogue between Habakkuk and Yahweh in which the prophet vented his fears and the Lord responded in love (chapter 1). Then it proceeded to a dirge in which the Lord explained the wickedness of the instrument that He would use to judge Judah, the Babylonians, and promised their ultimate destruction (chapter 2). It closes with a doxology in which Habakkuk praised God and recommitted himself to faith in and faithfulness to Yahweh as he anticipated hard times to come (chapter 3).

Habakkuk teaches us to face our doubts and questions honestly, take them humbly to the Lord, wait for His Word to teach us, and then worship Him no matter how we feel or what we see.

Habakkuk can be a great help to people who are discouraged about their present circumstances and can see nothing good coming in the future. It helps us adjust our attitude from one of pessimism and even despair to optimism and rejoicing. The crucial issue is whether we will listen to God and believe Him, namely, exercise a true, saving faith.