

HABAKKUK: History is in God's Hands

by Ray C. Stedman

The name *Habakkuk* means “embracer,” not in the romantic sense, but in a comforting sense and this is a great book of comfort. Comfort in probably the most distressing problem that human beings have to face: the great question of why God allows certain things to happen. I do not know any more up-to-date and relevant question than that one. As you read through this prophecy of Habakkuk you will discover that the problem he wrestled with and eventually learned the answer to – thus becoming a comforter and embracer of his people in their distress – is exactly the problem that you and I wrestle with today. For the prophet lived in a time very similar to our day – a time when everything was going wrong. He lived when there was great national corruption and distress, when the nation and land was filled with violence, with hatred, and with outbreaks of evil. His distress is reflected in the opening phrases of the book (Chapter 1, Verses 1-4):

The oracle of God which Habakkuk the prophet saw.

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,

and thou wilt not hear?

Or cry to thee “Violence!”

and thou wilt not save?

Why dost thou make me see wrongs and look upon trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;

strife and contention arise.

So the law is slacked

and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous,

so justice goes forth perverted.

{Hab 1:1-4 RSV}

Doesn't that sound like today? Why, Habakkuk says, does he have to cry “Violence!” and hear no answer? Here is the great problem of unanswered prayer. Here is a man who is disturbed about his nation. He sees everything going wrong. The people are living in wickedness; there is unrest, violence, injustice and oppression throughout the land. Those who have the responsibility to correct this do nothing about it. When the whole matter is brought before the courts, the courts themselves are corrupt. So Habakkuk is greatly troubled.

He is a man of God and he knows that the thing to do with a problem is to take it to God – and he has been doing that. He has been praying about his problem. But he does not get any answer. So his perplexed heart in bewilderment cries out, “Lord, how long do I have to keep this up, crying out to you like this? You do nothing about it. I have been watching for a change, watching for an outbreak of revival, watching for something to happen, yet nothing happens. How long must I continue?”

Have you ever felt that way? Look around at our nation and you can see everything breaking up, the shaking of long-standing foundations, people turning away from the faith and questioning things they never questioned before. People are expressing doubts, even outright unbelief, in circles where doubts have never been expressed before. Have you been praying for loved ones, wanting to see God change them and reach their lives, and nothing happens? This is the problem of unanswered prayer. It is a great problem and it perplexes the prophet.

But now God answers Habakkuk. The amazing thing about this prophecy is that it is not addressed to the people at all. Rather, this is a dialogue between a man and God. That is why it is so up-to-date. Every one of us is named Habakkuk

and each of us faces this problem from time to time. God answers (Verse 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.
{Hab 1:5 RSV}**

In other words, God says, "I have been answering your prayer, Habakkuk. You accuse me of silence, but I have not been silent. You just do not know how to recognize my answer. I have been answering but the answer is so different from what you expect that you will not even recognize it or believe it when I tell you. But let me tell you what it is." Then God goes on (Verse 6 ff):

**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.
Dread and terrible are they;
their justice and dignity proceed from
themselves.
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.
They all come for violence;
terror of them goes before them.
They gather captives like sand.
At kings they scoff,
and of rulers they make sport.
They laugh at every fortress,
for they heap up earth and take it.
Then they sweep by like the wind and go
on,
guilty men, whose own might is their god!
{Hab 1:6-11 RSV}**

Does that sound like anyone you know? You could substitute the Communists, or in the last generation you could have replaced Chaldeans with Nazis. Here is God's answer to the prophet's problem: God says that he is preparing to raise up this nation of the Chaldeans. Now at the time Habakkuk wrote, the Chaldeans were not an important people. (Another name for Chaldeans is the Babylonians.) These names are used interchangeably in the Old Testament but at the time the prophet wrote, the great nation that frightened all

the other nations and ruled as the great tyrant of the world of that day was the Assyrian nation. Their capital was Nineveh, referred to in previous prophecies.

But here is a little nation that is beginning to rise up in world history and God says to the prophet, "I am behind this. These people are a very strange people. They are bitter, hostile, ruthless and cold-blooded. They are going to be as powerful as any nation on earth has ever been and they will sweep through lands conquering everything, and it will look as though nothing can stop them. These people will not have any god at the center of their life. They believe that their own might is their god, and they trust in their own strength. I am behind the rise of this people, and this is the answer to your prayer."

Now that is a little astounding, isn't it? Evidently Habakkuk did not know what to make of this. There is a moment of silence here and then he begins to reflect. If he thought he had a problem to start with, he really has one now. Now he is battling in the major leagues when it comes to problems, for how will God solve the original one by creating such a major problem as this?

This is what bothers many people as they look at what is happening in the world. The thing that has threatened the faith of many has been the problem of history. Why does God allow things to happen the way they do? Why does he permit such terrible events to occur in human history? I recently saw the results of a survey of the questions that non-Christian students were asking on campuses around our country. Number one on the list was: "How can a just or loving God allow men to suffer? Why would God create us and then allow disease and starvation and all those other terrible things?"

Now there are many who ask that question today and many whose faith is actually faltering because of this. They are saying, "How can this be? What kind of a universe do we live in?" Of course, others are quick to supply an answer. They say, "Well, the answer is that there is no God and it is no use thinking there is one. We are living in a machine-like universe, with ponderously clanking gears, and nobody really knows what makes it operate. Chance put it all together. You only fool yourself when you imagine a father image out of the desire of your heart, and you call it God."

The reason they say this is because of the apparent inactivity of God. That is one of the mysterious things about God, isn't it? The poet, William Cowper, said, "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." And the ways of God are full of mystery to us. We have to recognize that there are times when we just cannot understand how God is moving. It does not seem to make sense, and the instruments he chooses are sometimes so out of the ordinary. God is so unorthodox. He is always doing things the wrong way, and picking up the wrong people and operating in the most surprising fashion. One of the things that you learn about God after you live with him for a while is that he is always doing the unexpected. It is not because he delights to puzzle us, but because the variety of his workings are so infinite that our feeble human minds cannot grasp them.

Now that was the problem that afflicted Habakkuk. He was puzzled by this strange silence and then when he heard how God was moving, he could not understand that either. But now he does a very wise thing and the next section of this book is a most important passage because it tells us how to handle this kind of a problem. What do you do when you are confronted with this sort of a threat to your faith? When you see what looks like inaction on God's part and then maybe you see that he is acting, but in a way that seems utterly unbelievable, what do you do? One of the great needs in our Christian life is to understand the method of approaching problems like this. And the method can be outlined very simply. There are four very simple steps and as we go on you will see how the prophet follows them through:

- First of all, stop and think. Do not react emotionally to the problem. Do not let panic grip you, or some terrible fear come over you. Stop and think. All right, think about what?
- Second, restate to yourself the basic things you know about God. Do not try to solve the problem immediately. Back away from it and begin with God. Go back to what you know about God and his character as it has been revealed to you in revelation and by experience.
- Then, take what you know about the character of God and bring it to bear on the problem. That is the third step.

- And, finally, if you have not come to an answer, leave the rest with faith in God and ask him to show it to you.

That is the way. Notice how the prophet does this. First, he starts thinking about God (Verse 12):

**Art thou not from everlasting,
O LORD my God, my Holy One?
We shall not die. {Hab 1:12 RSV}**

Habakkuk has reminded himself of some great things in that statement, "Art thou not from everlasting?" The first thing that he thinks about is that the God he knows is an everlasting God. God sits above history He is greater than any span of human events. He created history. He is from the beginning and he is at the end. He preceded the beginning; he lasts beyond the end. He is the God of eternity. That is the first thing the prophet reminds himself of. When these Chaldeans come, they will trust in their own might as their God. "Oh, yes," Habakkuk says, "but my God is not like that. My God is not one of these localized tribal deities. He is the God who covers history, who himself governs these events, the everlasting God."

Second, the prophet reminds himself that God is the self-existent one because he uses a very special name for God. He says,

**Art thou not from everlasting,
O LORD my God? {Hab 1:12a RSV}**

When the word "Lord" is all in capital letters as it is here, it is a translation of the Hebrew word for Jehovah. *Jehovah* means "I am that I am." The great name that God revealed to Moses when he was in Egypt. At that time he said to him, "Go down to Egypt and tell Pharaoh that 'I am that I am' sent you," (cf, Exod 3:14). Do you know why Habakkuk reminded himself of this? Because there were people in his day going around saying that God was dead. There always are. There is absolutely nothing new in this. Let us get rid of this egotistical idea that we are the first generation that has had any problems. They have happened to all the people before us. There is nothing new. While people went around saying that God was dead, Habakkuk went right back to what he had learned about God. God is self-existent and cannot die. It

is impossible for a self-existent person to die: "I am that I am."

Third, Habakkuk reminds himself of the holiness of God: "My Holy One." Now, what does holiness mean? I dare say most of us use this word without any idea of what it means. Does it mean that he is some sort of a fearsome being and that we had better be careful not to get too close to him because he is holy? No, *holiness* is "wholeness," "completeness," it is being "a whole person." It means essentially that God is consistent with himself. He is always what he is. He is never anything different, never a phony. He never pretends or puts on. That is holiness.

You can find this reflected all through the Scriptures – the unchangeability of God. The writer of Hebrews says, "Thou, Lord, didst found the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of thy hands ... they will be changed. But thou art the same, and thy years will never end," (Heb 1:10, 1:12b RSV). Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and for ever, {Heb 13:8 KJV}. With him there is no shadow of turning {cf, Jas 1:17}, no changeability at all.

After the prophet reminds himself of this, he immediately adds these words, "We shall not die." What does he mean? He is thinking of the fact that God has made a covenant with Abraham. God promised Abraham that he would raise up a nation that would forever be his people and that he would never allow them to be eliminated from the earth. The prophet is reminding himself of that, in the face of this fearsome threat. The Chaldeans are going to come rolling across this land. He will see his own beloved Jerusalem ravished and captured and his people led away into captivity. But there is the reminder that God is not going to let the worst happen. They will not die. They will not be eliminated. God's faithfulness remains. He is unchangeable.

So the prophet comes now to a conclusion that settles at least the first part of his problem. He says (Verse 12):

**O LORD, thou has ordained them as a judgment;
and thou, O Rock, hast established them for chastisement. {Hab 1:12b RSV}**

"Now I understand why you are raising up the Chaldeans; it is your way of waking my people up

to their folly, to their awful stupidity in turning away from you. They think they can live without you, and yet how many times have you sent prophets to them, pleading, begging and reminding them of your word? You have poured out blessing after blessing upon them, and still they go on in their senseless folly, taking it all for granted, thinking they can go on living without you. Now I see what you are doing. You are raising up a people to shock them into reality, to awaken and chastise them. I understand this now."

Is there any question that God does this in history? Doubtless this is why the Nazis were allowed to come so suddenly to power, to ravish Europe and then be suddenly struck down again. It was to awaken the Western world to its greediness, its covetousness, its wickedness, and to its departure from the things of truth and of God. God is saying something through this. He is shaking the nations. This is God's pattern throughout history.

Then the prophet says, "I see that, but now I have another problem." He goes on (Verse 13):

**Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold
evil
and canst not look on wrong,
why dost thou look on faithless men,
and art silent when the wicked swallows
up
the man more righteous than he?
{Hab 1:13 RSV}**

And Habakkuk goes on to describe the wickedness of the Chaldeans. "Now," he says, "I can see how you are raising up this nation to punish these people, but I don't understand this. Despite the wickedness of my own people, they are not as bad as these Chaldeans. How is it that you are using a wicked, godless, ruthless people like this to punish your own people? This I don't understand."

Have you ever heard that? Have you ever heard anybody say, "It is true that America has problems, and maybe are kind of a wicked people, but we are not as bad as the Communists (or the Nazis, or whoever else might be our enemies at the time). God won't let these people take over here, because after all, they are far worse than we are."

So the prophet says, "I don't understand this." And since he does not know what to do, he follows the fourth step; he just leaves the problem with God. Now that is a very wise thing to do because our human minds do not grasp all the intricacies of

history. There is so much that we do not understand. So at this point many people say, "It must mean there isn't any God" or "God is not like the Bible says he is" or "I can't believe this. If God won't explain to me what he is going to do, I can't believe in him any longer."

But the prophet says, "Well, I don't understand, but then you are mightier than I, and I will just wait for you to reveal it to me." Notice how he begins Chapter 2:

**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. {Hab 2:1 RSV}**

That is a wise thing to do. First, Habakkuk says that he is going to get away from the problem for awhile. "I am going to leave the matter with God and wait for him to take the next step. I have gone as far as I can. I have reasoned from the character of God. I know that he has eyes purer than to look upon evil. He does not like evil. He has no complicity with it. I know that. And yet he is raising up these evil people. I don't understand, but I will let God explain it to me and I will wait for an answer."

Can you do this? When you bring a problem to God and explain it all to him in prayer, do you get up and start worrying about it again? (How is this going to work out? What do I do next?) That is the thing that defeats us so many times. But the prophet leaves it there. He says, "It is up to you." Verse 2:

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

In other words, "Habakkuk, I am going to tell you the answer. Now I want you to write it down and I want you to write it so plainly that anyone who reads it will be able to immediately tell the answer abroad, spread it all over the land." Then God adds these significant words (Verse 3):

**"For still the vision awaits its time;
It hastens to the end – it will not die.
If it seem slow, wait for it;**

**it will surely come, it will not delay."{Hab
2:3 RSV}**

God is saying, "Habakkuk, this isn't going to happen right away. There is going to be a lapse of time, but it will come." This is the character of God's revelation. First God says that an event will happen. Then he says, "Don't you worry about what happens in between. Even though it looks like everything is going wrong, what I have said will happen is going to happen, and if it seems to delay, wait for it. It will come."

Then God goes on to state a principle that is quoted three times in the New Testament and forms the basis for the greatest movements that God has ever had among human beings. He says these words (Verse 4):

**"Behold, he whose soul is not upright in
him shall fall,
but the righteous shall live by his faith."
{Hab 2:4 RSV}**

These words are quoted in the New Testament in Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. This is the word that lit a fire in the heart of Martin Luther, "The righteous shall live by faith." Not by circumstances, or by observations, or by reasoning, but by faith in what God has said will happen.

In these words the prophet is shown that there are only two possible outlooks on life. There are only two attitudes by which we can face life. Either we face it in faith depending upon God, or we face it in unbelief depending upon our own ability to reason out everything. These are the two fundamental attitudes, and they are the only two. You can only have one or the other. If you look around you will see that every human being on the face of the earth can be put into one of these two categories. Either they are trusting in the wisdom of the human mind to study events and arrange solutions, and they try to analyze the writings of clever men and come to conclusions about human events based on these sources, or they take what God has said and believe that when he has said a thing will happen, it will happen and that all of history converges into, and hinges on, that promise.

Now that is the difference between a man of faith and a man who lives by his reason. One of the saddening things to me is to see how many Christians are being trapped into actually living by reason, and by the cleverness of the human rational

processes, in the name of Christianity. There are many who say that the job of the church is to organize people who are disadvantaged in some way so they can exercise political influence and power, bringing pressure to bear on the leaders of the nation to correct abuses, and that this is the Christian thing to do. Now I am not suggesting that it is wrong to help people in need. This is entirely right, as God leads. But the processes of depending upon pressure blocks and picket lines and so on is not even remotely Christian. That is not what the Word of God says to do at all. In contrast, look at the stories of the men and women in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews. How did they change the world of their day? It says that they endured as seeing one who is invisible. They were not expecting man to do anything. They were expecting God to work and God always did work. As he worked, things began to change, and the history of that kind of working is the amazing success story of men and women who stopped the mouths of lions, subdued kingdoms, toppled thrones, won empires and changed the course of history by faith – not by counting on man to work but on God.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, then, there is a very interesting analysis of the Chaldeans and what God plans to do with them. To summarize, God says to the prophet, “Now. Habakkuk, don’t you worry about the Chaldeans; it is true that I have purer eyes than to behold evil and it is also true that I am raising up this people to judge the nation of Israel, but in turn I will judge the Chaldeans. The very thing in which they trust will prove to be their downfall. Their very gods will overthrow them.”

And he pronounces five woes on these people (Verse 6):

“Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own {Hab 2:6b RSV}

[Woe to the man who lives by the philosophy, “I will get everything I can and it doesn’t matter how I do it.”]

Verse 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!**

{Hab 2:9 RSV}

[Woe to the fellow who is devoting all his efforts towards being secure and safe in his

old age. God says that he will find the foundations pulled out from under him and everything he has invested himself in will be swept away.]

Verse 12:

**Woe to him who builds a town with blood,
and founds a city on iniquity!**

{Hab 2:12 RSV}

[Woe to those who trust in violence to achieve what they want.]

Verse 15:

**Woe to him who makes his neighbors drink
of the cup of his wrath, and makes them
drunk,**

to gaze on their shame! {Hab 2:15 RSV}

[Woe to the man who creates fear in those around him in order to rule over them, and to gain from them.]

Verse 19:

**Woe to him who says to a wooden thing,
Awake; {Hab 2:19a RSV}**

[Woe to the man who trusts in a false god, who thinks that the forces around him are able to control him, give him life and fulfill his desires.]

Finally, in Chapter 3 the prophet concludes with a most remarkable prayer. Here he has seen his answer. God is the God of history and he is moving; he has everything under control. The thing we need to remember is that these forces and the problems created by them are not solved by trying to come to grips with only the immediate problem. That is like taking aspirin to cure cancer. It will never work. No, these problems can be solved only by the relationship of man to God. Habakkuk says (Verse 20):

**But the LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth keep silence before him.
{Hab 2:20 RSV}**

Then he begins this mighty prayer (Chapter 3, Verse 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.
{Hab 3:2 RSV}**

Habakkuk began this book by saying, "Lord, why don't you do something." Now he says, "Lord, be careful, don't do too much. In wrath remember mercy. I see you are working Lord, but remember in the midst of it that you are still a God of mercy." That is all he has to say; there is no more philosophy, no more theology, no more arguing with God.

This prayer is one of the most remarkably beautiful, poetic passages in all the Scriptures. Read it and see how the prophet is doing nothing more or less than going back and remembering what God has done in the past. That is what convinces Habakkuk that God can be trusted. He rests upon events that have already occurred, events which cannot be questioned or taken away or shaken in any way; the great fact that God has already moved in human history. And this is where faith must rest. We do not live by blind faith. We live with a God who has acted in time and space, who has done something, who has indelibly recorded his will in the progress of human events. The prophet looks back to God's action in Egypt when Israel was in trouble and remembers here how God moved (Verses 3, 4):

**God came from Teman,
and the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
His brightness was like the light,
rays flashed from his hand;
and there he veiled his power.
{Hab 3:3-4 RSV}**

Remember how he hid his power from Pharaoh, and then flashed out in sudden acts of miraculous intervention? The prophet says (Verse 5, 6):

**Before him went pestilence,
and plague followed close behind,
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.
{Hab 3:5-6 RSV}**

He remembers how the people of Israel were afflicted and in the wilderness, and how in the land of Midian they trembled. Then he thinks of the crossing of the Red Sea and how God made a way through the waters, and he is reminded of how the Jordan River was rolled back when they came into the land (Verse 10):

**the deep gave forth its voice,
it lifted its hands on high.
{Hab 3:10b RSV}**

Habakkuk recalls how at the request of Joshua (Verse 11):

The sun and moon stood still in their habitation {Hab 3:11a RSV}

This is the kind of God we have. The God who actually moves in human history to accomplish events that no man can duplicate. As the prophet thinks of all this, his mind goes out to the greatness of God and this is the way he concludes (Verse 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.
{Hab 3:16 RSV}**

He sees the problem and he knows it is coming. The fearsomeness of it grips him, and he feels the pressure. But that is not all. He adds (Verses 17-19):

**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,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will joy in the God of my salvation.
God, the LORD, is my strength;
he makes my feet like hinds' feet,
he makes me tread upon my high places.
{Hab 3:17-19 RSV}**

Have you discovered that? That though the problem remains and the pressure is still there, there can be a strengthening of the inner man that

