

# When a Prophet Questions God

Valley Center Seventh-day Adventist Church

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Delivered On: November 13, 2010

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Today the Word of the Lord comes to us from the book of Habakkuk, tucked away in the closing pages of the Old Testament. It is included with the books of the so-called “Minor Prophets,” not because these writings are in any way less inspired or less important, but only because in general, they are of smaller size than the writings of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel.

I’ve heard his name pronounced a couple of different ways, with the accent on the first syllable or the second. It’s possible that neither of these comes close to how it was pronounced back then. I’ve grown used to hearing his name given with the accent on the second syllable, and will pronounce it that way as we study together this morning.

Habakkuk had a problem. More than one, actually. He had huge questions for which he didn’t have answers. There were things he just couldn’t figure out. Have you ever felt that way? And Habakkuk was a prophet, one who was close to God! You might expect that since he was the spokesman for God, he wouldn’t find himself in such a situation. But there he was, wrestling with these large questions and struggling for answers. Was it right to even think about questioning God’s wisdom? And what can you and I gain today, as the year 2010 comes quickly to its close, as we review the journey of this prophet’s quest for answers. Is it possible that we can gain some comfort, some assurance as we come to places in life in which we say with frustration, “I just don’t understand”?

Lewis had been a bachelor until late in life, and then in a civil ceremony he married the woman of his dreams. But then she contracted cancer and the light seemed to go out of their lives. However, the cancer went into remission and joy returned. They were married in a church wedding and life was great again, until the cancer returned and she passed away. His thoughts about God’s grace and love turned to darkness. He said, “Go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double-bolting on the inside. After that, silence.” Such were the struggles and questions of one who would later come to a better realization of God’s love and the mystery of His purposes, the author C. S. Lewis.

Habakkuk lived long ago. From the information contained within his short message, historians have placed it around 630 B.C. This would have positioned him at some point near the end of the reign of the wicked Manasseh or possibly during the reign of Josiah, kings of Judah. Already, about

100 years before this, the northern kingdom of Israel had been taken into captivity by the hand of the Assyrians.

As Habakkuk looked over the social and religious conditions among his people, he saw little evidence that Judah had learned any of the lessons that God had hoped they would gain from what had happened to Israel. It broke his heart to see what was happening in his country as the people fell further and further away from godliness. Idolatry was rampant. Gross violence covered the streets. Materialism and greed preoccupied the minds of most. Few there were who pursued a life of genuine piety. All of this brought pain to the heart of God's servant.

Can you relate to that today? As you review how our country has departed quickly from the principles of righteousness and made the practice of Christianity a byword, in some cases a crime, while violence flourishes, while the practice of occult rituals and pagan religions is given prominence and protection, while the practice of lifestyles forbidden by God's Word are championed, does it sadden your heart? Can you appreciate the thoughts that were in the mind of Habakkuk?

This is what he wrote. "The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw. O LORD, how long shall I cry, and You will not hear? Even cry out to You, "Violence!" and You will not save. Why do You show me iniquity and cause me to see trouble? For plundering and violence are before me; there is strife and contention arises. Therefore the law is powerless, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; therefore perverse judgment proceeds." Habakkuk 1:1-4.

Notice that the content of his message is called a "burden." This was something that weighed heavily on his heart. To Habakkuk every aspect of life was on a downward spiral. The court system was depraved; justice was being perverted constantly. It seemed that the ungodly were the ones who prospered and got ahead in life. Strife and bloodshed were splashed throughout their communities. Violence and "plundering" were seen everywhere. Why didn't God do something? It was a mystery to Habakkuk!

He cried out, "How long?" This is a question that has been on human lips since the beginning of time. Listen to just a few of the times this question has been posed. Job asked, "How long? Will You not look away from me, and let me alone till I swallow my saliva? Have I sinned? What have I done to You, O Watcher of men? Why have You set me as Your target?" Job 7:19, 20. Have you ever felt you had a "bull's eye" on your back? Job did!

David wrote, "My soul also is greatly troubled; But You, O LORD--how long? Return, O LORD, deliver me! Oh, save me for Your mercies' sake!" Psalm 6:3, 4. In the 13<sup>th</sup> Psalm this question is repeated 4 times. "How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart daily? How long will my enemy be exalted over me?" Psalm 13:1-2. "Lord, how long will You look on? Rescue me from their destructions, my precious life from the lions." Psalm 35:17. "O God, how long will the adversary reproach? Will the enemy blaspheme Your name forever? Psalm 74:10. "How long,

LORD? Will You be angry forever? Will Your jealousy burn like fire? Pour out Your wrath on the nations that do not know You, and on the kingdoms that do not call on Your name.” Psalm 79:5, 6.

Moses wrote, “Return, O LORD! How long? And have compassion on Your servants.” Psalm 90:13. “LORD, how long will the wicked, how long will the wicked triumph?” Psalm 94:3. Isaiah made the same request. “Then I said, ‘Lord, how long?’” Isaiah 6:11. Jeremiah wondered, “How long?” Jeremiah 4:21, 12:4. In the book of Daniel the question is posed, “How long will the vision be, concerning the daily and the transgression of desolation?” Daniel 8:13. In the book of Zechariah we read, “O LORD of hosts, How long will You not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which You were angry these seventy years?” Zechariah 1:12. At least the voice of Habakkuk was not alone in raising this question!

God had an answer for Habakkuk. In this case, the answer was going to come sooner than many would believe! “Look among the nations and watch--be utterly astounded! For I will work a work in your days which you would not believe, though it were told you. For indeed I am raising up the Chaldeans, a bitter and hasty nation which marches through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling; places that are not theirs. They gather captives like sand. They scoff at kings, and princes are scorned by them. They deride every stronghold, for they heap up mounds of earth and seize it.” Habakkuk 1:5, 6, 9, 10.

God was going to do something, but it was through a means which Habakkuk would not have selected. God was going to use the kingdom of the Chaldeans, the Babylonians to administer discipline against the wickedness of Judah. The rise of the Babylonian kingdom from relative obscurity is a matter of historical record. There had been a “Babylon” before this; actually you could say there were two. There was the original “Babylon,” the tower of Babel. Then there was a Babylon that existed during the days of Abraham, in which the famous Hammurabi ruled and compiled his famous code of laws. But in the ensuing centuries, the kingdom of Babylon had fallen into a state of political impotency.

Then Nebopolassar became ruler in 626 B.C. He exerted unusual energy and strategy and made Babylon a force to be reckoned with. When he died, his son Nebuchadnezzar continued this aggressive ambition and Babylon became the nation before whom all others bowed, the “head of gold” in the statue dream of Daniel 2. In a short twenty-year span, Babylon went from being a virtual “nothing” to a world empire! No wonder God said, “You won’t believe it even if I tell you.”

The Bible gives us a perspective of history that the world does not recognize and cannot grasp. For the person who sees only the visible, the nation with the bigger army wins. Human tactics and wisdom are given credit for the rise and success of nations. This is not the perspective the Bible provides. The Bible teaches us that through all events, behind the scenes of every action, an unseen Power exercises authority. Thus the book of Daniel opens with the comment, “The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand.” It is doubtful whether Nebopolassar ever recognized that the arm of the Almighty lifted his throne; his son Nebuchadnezzar had a struggle coming to

that understanding, and his grandson Belshazzar repudiated the intervention of Jehovah in the affairs of his kingdom. Nevertheless, the “Most High rules in the kingdom of men.”

Concerning the sins of Judah, Habakkuk was told that discipline would be rendered. Punishment would be administered. Sin would not continue unchecked. A day of reckoning was approaching. They would “heap up mounds of earth,” building ramps to ascend the city walls. Captives would be taken “as the sand of the sea.” All this became reality. In three successive assaults, Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem and depleted her cities of their inhabitants. Daniel and his friends went in the first invasion in 605 B.C., Ezekiel and others went in the second invasion in 597 B.C., and almost all the remaining were taken in 586 when Jerusalem fell for the third time. It was hoped that by this experience Judah would repent and return to the Lord and offer the sacrifice of genuine devotion.

But now the prophet had another problem! How could God use the wicked Babylonians to punish Judah? Was that right? Was that fair? How could a righteous and holy God employ as His “servants” ones who were depraved and wicked? Here’s Habakkuk asking his questions. “You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness. Why do You look on those who deal treacherously, and hold Your tongue when the wicked devours one more righteous than he?” Habakkuk 1:13. The prophet retired to his lookout post to wait for God’s answer.

The Lord told Habakkuk that Babylon would itself one day be punished for its sins. It would not be held guiltless for its transgressions. Both the wickedness of Judah and that of Babylon would be visited with justice in due time. In chapter two of his book, from verse 5 to the end of the chapter the Lord outlines the misdeeds which would call forth the retribution of Babylon, including pride (v. 5) and greed (vs. 5-7), violence (v. 8), covetous materialism (vs. 9-11), violence (vs. 12, 17), drunkenness and immorality (vs. 15, 16) and idolatry (vs. 18, 19). These were not unlike the sins of Judah.

Question: are not these the very same sins that characterize our generation? As you scan the society of today, is it any different than what Habakkuk saw in his lifetime? Will not the same God Who took action back then take action today?

Before the list of the sins of Babylon were enumerated to the prophet, God had counsel for Habakkuk. He said, “Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time; but at the end it will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry. Behold the proud. His soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith.” Habakkuk 2:2-4.

The prophet is told to make a permanent record, writing on perhaps stone tablets or wooden boards, the message that God had for him. He was to write it plainly so that it could be read fluently and easily. Here is a lesson for those who deliver the Word of God today: present it in such a way that it can be easily understood and digested. Sermons that employ lofty terms that require a dictionary to interpret are not in keeping with the simplicity of the Gospel and God’s

desire for all men and women (and children!) to be able to grasp the fundamental truths of heaven. The great preacher H.M.S. Richards remarked, “Feed My sheep,” said Jesus, not “My giraffes.”

The prophet was encouraged to cultivate patience. The “vision” was for an appointed time. Though the fulfillment of it might seem to be delayed, the prophet was counseled to not lose courage. “Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come. It will not tarry.” After the list of Babylon’s sins, the second chapter ends with the comment, “The LORD is in His holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before Him.”

The Lord invited the prophet to “behold the proud. His soul is not upright within him.” God made mankind in His image, with perfection of form, intellect and character. His thoughts and will were in perfect conformity with the purposes of God. But then sin entered the picture and man’s character was flawed. Concerning this the wise man said, “God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.” Ecclesiastes 7:29. (By the way, in that passage there is a clear rejection of the Darwinian progression depicting the origin of mankind.) God made man “upright;” that is, with a noble and holy character. But then pride came in through transgression. That is why the Lord said, “behold the proud. His soul is not upright within him.”

When sin entered, the love of self replaced the love of God. This is the root of all sin; the spring of all the transgressions in the list to follow. As a matter of fact, it’s mentioned again in verse 5, “Indeed, because he transgresses by wine, he is a proud man.” The purpose of the Gospel is to replace our love of self with His agape love; to replace pride with Christ’s humility; to receive Christ’s way of thinking and true faith. “The just shall live by his faith.” This phrase became the hallmark of Paul’s theology, being quoted in Romans, Galatians and Hebrews.

The one who exercised such confidence and patience in the eventual and timely outworking of God’s purposes would be the man of “faith.” Habakkuk was invited, as we are today, to walk in the pathway of faith as he struggled with the questions on his mind. In chapter 3, the prophet turns poet and presents his prayer in the form of a song. It is said to be composed “on Shigionoth,” a term for which we lack a precise definition. It is thought that this type of song reflected rapid changes in rhythm and cadence.

“O LORD, I have heard Your speech and was afraid. O LORD, revive Your work in the midst of the years! In the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.” Habakkuk 3:2. Habakkuk acknowledges the answer of the Lord and sense of awe with which he is struck. He hopes that during the discipline, mercy will be remembered, and that the fulfillment of God’s purpose will be in the “midst,” rather than at the tail end of the age.

He then points us forward to the ultimate solution, the coming of Christ as King in glory. As he presents the incomparable spectacle of Jesus returning in the sky, he skillfully weaves threads from the wonderful salvation stories of the past, recalling the marvelous display of God’s glory in the giving of the law from Mt. Sinai (“God came from Teman, the Holy One from Paran,” v. 3); the

miraculous day when God fought for Joshua and the sun stood still (“The sun and moon stood still in their habitation,” v. 11). He includes an allusion to the rescue of Israel through the Red Sea (“You walked through the sea with Your horses, through the heap of great water,” v. 15). All of these episodes foreshadowed the future glorious rescue of God’s people at the end of the age.

The secret of God’s power and love are included in this presentation. “His brightness was like the light; He had rays flashing from His hand, and there His power was hidden.” Habakkuk 3:4. The light of God’s love, shining through the wounds of Christ’s hands are the hiding of His power. It is this revelation that will cause the righteous to shout in triumph and the wicked to run in terror. In these wounded hands the saved will recognize the tokens of their redemption; in these hands the lost will perceive the folly of their rejection of His love.

What is the message of Habakkuk for us today? First, it’s not unusual if you struggle with questions, even if you are a Christian. Habakkuk was a prophet, yet he wrestled with these things. Second, God is in control. Though it looks like the wicked prosper and the righteous fail, though it seems the wicked are promoted and the godly become a doormat, know that He is still on the throne. He knows the circumstances of your life; He will take action. When He does, it will seem to come suddenly, unexpectedly. For many people, “they wouldn’t believe it though it were told them.”

Times may try our patience, but let faith accomplish her work. This is not the time to give up. God’s plan will be worked out, will come to fulfillment. Notice the paradox: “Though it tarryes, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.” Perhaps we could paraphrase, “Though it may seem to tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.” “The Lord is in His Holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him.”

The prophet concludes with one of the most beautiful prayers in all the Bible. “Though the fig tree may not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines; though the labor of the olive may fail, and the fields yield no food; though 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. The LORD is my strength; He will make my feet like deer’s feet, and He will make me walk on my high hills.” Habakkuk 3:17-19.