

The Prophet Habakkuk

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“The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see” (Hab. 1: 1)

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Habakkuk 1

Introduction

Everything in Scripture is given for our learning, both in its speaking and in its silence. It tells us nothing about Habakkuk himself, nor about the time of his prophecy. The most careful and precise inquiries by the critics about the time in which the prophet wrote have resulted in conflicting conclusions. When the facts presented in God's Word are sufficiently clear and allow us to place the prophecy in the sphere in which it was produced, we receive much clarity and edification. But when God does not speak, the researches of scholars are of limited value to the Christian, no matter how interesting they might be.

Certain indications, however, make it *quite probable* that Habakkuk prophesied during the reign of King Josiah. Two circumstances could support this idea: (1) Israel's idolatry is not mentioned in Habakkuk; (2) the Chaldean rather than the Assyrian (who was the adversary during the reign of Hezekiah and Manasseh) is seen as Israel's enemy. Whatever the case, the fact that God's Spirit does not mention the circumstances during the time when the prophecy was given, accentuates the spiritual character of this book. Habakkuk reveals very few prophetic events. He described *the character of God's ways* in view of the *moral condition* of the people and the nations. Moreover, this Book shows us the result this revelation had in the prophet's heart. Thus he became a picture of the *spiritual condition* of the remnant of the last days.

All this is of great importance and significance for us. Because all historical details have been omitted, it is immediately evident that we have to do with the *principles* which rule us today just as they did the people of Habakkuk's days. These principles prove God's perfect governmental ways and the holiness of His Being. When the Christian meditates on these things, he can only worship the divine perfection found in them.

The spiritual condition in the midst of which Habakkuk lived is as follows. Though he records many misdeeds in Israel, there is no mention of idolatry, as in Zephaniah; among its enemies, the Chaldeans, a coarse kind of idolatry was overshadowed by the *glorification of man*. The prophet himself displayed an indignant spirit and a sorrowful heart, though enlightened by the divine instruction. He learned to live by faith in anticipation of the coming glory, but he overflowed with songs of praise even before he had received the promise.

We already mentioned that there is a remarkable agreement between the day of Habakkuk and our day. This causes the prophecy to be tremendously significant for us, as confirmed in the New Testament. The quotations from Habakkuk support and illustrate Paul's *whole* doctrine of God's righteousness, of faith, of life, of the resurrection of Christ and His coming, of the wrath of God revealed from heaven, and, finally, of the glory! Only the mystery of the Assembly, which is not revealed in the Old Testament, is lacking from this summary. Thus the harmony between the various parts of God's Word is confirmed, forming one whole. Awareness of this harmony will keep the believer from giving credence to learned critics, enemies of the Word, of whom God Himself declares, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and set aside the understanding of the understanding ones" (1 Cor. 1: 19; Isa. 29: 14).

God is not Indifferent to the Sins of His People

"Jehovah, how long shall I cry and thou wilt not hear? I cry out unto thee, Violence! and thou

dost not save. Why dost thou cause me to see iniquity, and lookest thou upon grievance? For spoiling and violence are before me; and there is strife, and contention riseth up. Therefore the law is powerless, and justice doth never go forth; for the wicked encompasseth the righteous; therefore judgment goeth forth perverted” (Hab. 1: 2-4).

Even in these first verses we notice that among the minor prophets the Book of Habakkuk displays a special character. In Micah we see, as it were, a conversation consisting of questions and answers between the Lord, His prophet, and various other speakers. That discourse ends with a court session in which the accused appears before his judges. In Nahum, the Lord alone addresses, in turn, the various persons involved. In Habakkuk we are present during a *most intimate* talk between the prophet and His God. Habakkuk spoke to the Lord and He answered him. In this respect there is a similarity with Jeremiah. But here this touching event takes place in *the heart and conscience* of Habakkuk. It is not interrupted by any event of a personal nature as it was during the course of Jeremiah's prophecy. Fear beset him when he saw what was happening, but the events themselves did not seem to affect him personally. They gave rise to questions of such a besetting nature that he felt the need to pour out his heart before the Lord, to be delivered from the deep-seated unrest these events had brought about within him.

Habakkuk was a man of faith and his first word: “Lord, how long...” shows this. However, his faith needed strengthening and enlightenment. It was mixed with weakness. And indeed, it found an answer full of mercy, for God reprimands unbelief, but not the weakness of our human nature. Our weakness is met with the compassion of Him who was “tempted in all things in like manner, sin apart” (Heb. 4: 15).

In our case, weakness is always to a greater or lesser degree accompanied by sin. The apostle himself could glory in his weaknesses insofar as these were not mixed with the flesh (2 Cor. 9-10). In his weaknesses the Lord could accomplish His power in His beloved apostle.

A Cry of Faith

The expression “How long” is a *cry of faith* that we often encounter in the psalms and prophets. It expresses faith in *the certainty* that God, when the time has come, will answer. In the meantime, it accepts the tribulation as a *necessary* trial. The faithful remnant of Israel that during the last days will go through the trials of the Great Tribulation will utter this cry too. The remnant, however, will have the assurance that these trials are the last word of God's judgments, being the preparation for the glorious coming of the Messiah, to reign in liberty, righteousness, and peace.

In our chapter it is a little different. The prophet was a witness who stood separated from the people. Personally he did not suffer under *the violence* as will be the case with the remnant. He was a spectator and observed the suffering. It was not a case of Israel's idolatry here, but of that which characterized man corrupted by sin ever since the beginning of his history (Gen. 6: 11): *violence*, with its train of injustice, oppression, destruction, discord, and disunity among the people (vv. 2-3).

Today, as in the day of the prophet, every heart that is concerned about the Lord's interests can readily observe these things. They are “*before our eyes*” just as they were before the eyes of Habakkuk. Our resulting heaviness of heart increases all the more, as did Habakkuk's, when we see how these things take place among those who pretend to be God's people, during a time when the Lord has already forsaken them. Then, if our soul, just as weak as the prophet's, has not yet learned why God allows these evils to continue without bringing them to an end, we call: “Why dost Thou cause me to see iniquity, and lookest Thou upon grievance?”

In speaking thus, we forget two things which the prophet Nahum established (1: 3, 7): “Jehovah is slow to anger” and “Jehovah is good.” We call upon Him: “I cry out unto Thee, Violence! and Thou dost not save.” We would like to see God intervening against a spiritual and moral condition which we know He abhors. Actually, although this cry expresses our love for the believers who endure these disastrous times, our weakness manifests a touch of egoism!

“Thou dost not save.” The issue here is not a spiritual salvation, but a temporal deliverance. The anxious soul would like to see peace restored, and the violent ones judged and taken away. The violence is there, it occurs under our eyes, and — God does not answer! We repeat: this is not a lack of faith, but the cry of alarm uttered by a heart that, while not yet sufficiently established in trusting faith, sees itself confronted with a problem that thus far remains insolvable in his eyes. Why does God allow the evil? How can He seemingly forget His own who are defenseless in the midst of the wicked systems of man? The prophet would soon receive the answer, but a different one than he expected. He had to experience a sorrowful time of training that would become a rich blessing for his soul, before he understood what God would bring about in the hearts of His own in days of trial.

Unrighteousness and Ungodliness

“Therefore the law is powerless.” The purpose of the law, earlier given by the Lord Himself, was to break the will of man. “Justice,” which man ought to have learned to apply under the protection of the law, “doth never go forth.” To the contrary, “the wicked encompasses the righteous.” We need to take special note of this phrase: “the righteous.” In chapter 2 we will find it again.

The prophet was well aware of his own uprightness. Later, when Israel's remnant will go through the judgments of the last days, it will also be aware of this. But Habakkuk had not yet received an answer and only saw the victory of evil over good. He directed his “why's” to God. He would certainly not have done so without trusting that God would answer him. How can it be that “justice doth never go forth” and that, when it is eventually pronounced, it is “perverted,” the opposite of what a God-fearing, righteous soul might have expected? No matter where the faithful believer turns, everywhere he meets injustice and ungodliness.

The Lord would soon answer. Meanwhile, the righteous one can conclude only that which God has observed ever since sin came into the world. Apart from those who have been justified through faith, there is not one righteous person in this world.

Regarding Israel's national character, the Word of God teaches us that during the reign of Rehoboam “in Judah there were good things” (2 Chr. 12: 12). And during Hezekiah's time, no matter how guilty Judah might have been, Scripture tells us: “Judah yet walketh with God, and with the holy things of truth” (Hosea 11: 12). However, during subsequent reigns this was not so. During that of Josiah we read (in the prophet Zephaniah) God's thoughts about the “nation without shame,” about the “rebellious and corrupted...oppressing city,” about its princes, judges, prophets, and priests (2: 1; 3: 1-4). At the end of its history, Israel's moral condition was not better than that of man at the beginning of man's history. This condition, actually, has never changed.

So we see that God caused the blessings for the people to depend on the behaviour of their kings, Israel's responsible leaders. During the reign of some of Judah's kings, the evil was halted, justice was established, piety toward the Lord was acknowledged, and the temple service was restored, but all without any change in *the heart* of the people as a result. On the other hand, the reign of a godless king aggravated this unhappy spiritual and moral condition of shameless idolatry, to which the corrupted heart of the people immediately abandoned itself.¹

God's Response

“See ye among the nations, and behold, and wonder marvellously; for *I* work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be declared *to you*” (Hab. 1: 5).

Here we find the answer to the prophet's question. It is not directed at him, but at the wicked ones about whom he had complained. They better “see among the nations” and observe with amazement how the Lord would recompense their deeds. At that particular moment, the Assyrian had not yet been annihilated; the Lord would, however, raise up the Chaldean. He would subject the other nations to this power but first of all cause His people to become subservient to them. Perhaps Israel expected to be delivered for good from oppression after it was set free from the yoke of the Assyrian. To the contrary, it would fall under an entirely different heavy and cruel yoke. And, what was even a more terrible judgment, the Lord would take the kingdom from Israel and commit it to Babel, to “the golden head” of the *Gentile* empire. That fate awaited the wicked nation. Simultaneously, the prophet received an answer upon his cry: “I cry out unto Thee, Violence! and Thou dost not save.” Thereby the Lord showed His servant that if He did not deliver the righteous from the violence of the wicked ones, it is because they will soon be chastised by Him. Israel would with its land fall under the stroke of Babylonia and be brought into slavery.

The Holy Spirit gives to this prophecy a much wider application, as we see in Acts 13. When Paul with Barnabas arrived in Antioch in Pisidia, he gave a message in the synagogue. The careful reader will note that it dealt precisely with Habakkuk 1: 5. When there was no salvation, and the prophet said: “Thou *dost not save*,” God raised up a Saviour to Israel who had died and who was risen. “The “word of this salvation” was sent specifically to those who had rejected Christ. They all heard this word, and they who feared God were called to accept it (Acts. 13: 23, 26).

The nation had neither known the Lord Jesus nor understood the voice of the prophets who had announced Him. Worse: it had condemned its Messiah and in so doing had fulfilled what Habakkuk had said of them: “Judgment goeth forth perverted” (1: 4). Therefore the apostle applied the word “of the prophets” to them, and in particular that of Habakkuk. He quoted and declared it in connection with the condition of those to whom he was speaking: “Behold, ye despisers, and wonder and perish; for I work a work in your days, a work which ye will in no wise believe if one declare it to you” (Acts 13: 41). They did no longer have to “see among the nations.” Long since, the Chaldeans had been replaced by other powers, finally by Rome, the last of all.

Since the days of Habakkuk the nation had lain under the yoke of the Gentiles. At the time of Paul's preaching, Israel was subject to the fourth Gentile power. Therefore the apostle did not say, like Habakkuk: “I will work a work in your days” (1: 5 KJV). God did the work, and it was *not* judgment. The great *salvation* was announced, first to the Jews, and if they despised it, and therefore proved to be despisers, the apostle would turn to the Gentiles. Then these would see among the Jews and observe the judgment over this nation because it had rejected the grace that had come to them in the Lord Jesus Christ. This took place in the same city of Antioch, where the Jews, because they thrust God's salvation in Christ from them, did not judge themselves to be worthy of eternal life.

The apostles “having shaken off the dust of their feet against them, came to Iconium” (Acts 13: 46, 51).

According to Paul, the gospel was the answer to the prophet's complaint: “Thou dost not save.” It was salvation when the nation deserved judgment. But when the Jews despised grace, a much more terrible judgment than the Babylonian exile, yes, than the yoke of the Romans, would remain for them.

The destruction of Jerusalem and their definitive scattering among the nations stood at the door. Here we have an example of the way in which God uses His own Word, and we will find other examples of this during the course of this exposition.

Again and again, God brings truths to light that announce grace, whereas the world could only expect judgment. How terrible then will be the judgment if man firmly rejects this grace! It is important to observe here, as it is with the exposition of every prophecy, that the imminent judgment by means of the Chaldeans foreshadowed a future judgment.

A Wicked Power

“For behold, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and impetuous nation, which marcheth through the breadth of the earth, to possess dwelling-places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful: their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves” (Hab. 1: 6-7).

The Lord took care that the prophet would learn another lesson. When He raised up the Chaldeans it was not because He had discovered any spiritual or moral good in them. Rather the contrary; they were a cruel nation. How could God ever appreciate this? They were impetuous, taking the initiative in attack, advancing over the breadth of the earth, conquering the countries of the world, and taking possession of inhabited regions not belonging to them.

This zeal to take possession of the territory of others and to annex it differs in no respect to what we see happening in our day. But the Chaldeans were the rod in God's hand to chasten Israel as well as the nations. The Lord had said, “See ye among the nations.” This all-overflowing stream, racing through the world, this flood wave of God's judgments had to fall on Israel. Prior to swallowing it, though, it would in its violence and terror swipe away everything it encountered in its path. That was surely well-suited to fill hearts with anxiety.

“Their judgment and their dignity proceed from themselves.” *His own will* determined what the Chaldean called *his right*. So it was also with his *dignity*. He did not take other's dignity into account. He felt that his own dignity exalted him above others. Highhandedness and boundless pride led him. Don't we know similar examples in our day? The believer might wish that this pride were put down, but God says to him: Don't you see that these judgments come from Me, and that they, though they begin with the nations surrounding you, *are meant for you*?

Then follows the lively and terrible description of the Chaldean power: “Their horses are swifter than the leopards, and are more agile than the evening wolves; and their horsemen prance proudly, and their horsemen come from afar: they fly as an eagle that hasteth to devour. They come all of them for violence: the crowd of their faces is forwards, and they gather captives as the sand. Yea, he scoffeth at kings, and princes are a scorn unto him; he derideth every stronghold: for he heapeth up dust, and taketh it” (Hab. 1: 8-10). More than once Jeremiah uses the same expressions (Jer. 4: 13; 5: 6; etc.). The Assyrian and the Chaldean showed common characteristics, but the Assyrian does not use such an *organized* way of conquering and slaughtering. The swiftness and agility of the Chaldeans were like those of a pack of hungry wolves rushing on silently. With gleaming eyes glowing in the dark, they were sure to reach their prey. Just at the right moment the horsemen came storming on, swift as eagles.

It was an attack filled with rage, just as we found in the prophecy of Nahum (ch. 2: 3-4; 3: 1-3). “They come all of them for violence.” The prophet, terrified about the condition of the people, calls to the Lord: “Violence!” God showed him that this violence would find its just retribution in the violent behaviour of Babel. “They gather captives as the sand...he derideth every stronghold.” History repeats

itself, people say with resignation. Doubtless, but that is only so since the characteristics of sinful man repeat themselves, challenging God's holiness, daring Him. When in turn, however, Babel's power begins to fall, its kings and rulers will be the laughingstock of others, just as the kings of the nations had been previously.

Relying on One's Own Strength

“Then will his mind change, and he will pass on, and become guilty: this his power is become his god” (Hab. 1: 11).

A moment came at which the head of the Chaldean nation, which the Lord held to be the person responsible for the task that God had entrusted to him, changed his mind. Instead of seeing himself as an instrument, he went beyond what he had been charged with and sinned thereby. It isn't as if he had not sinned a thousand times by his cruelties, pride, and idolatry. But the time came when his own strength assumed the place of God. The power that God had laid into his hands became his god. He worshipped that power: his power. He trusted in it, he honoured it.

The head of the Chaldean empire was not alone in this. During the events of the last days Babylon's successor, the Roman beast, healed of its deadly wound, will have no other religion. It is the religion propagated by the philosophy of Nietzsche [the *gbermensch* — exalted by the military powers during the author's days]. During the events of mankind's last days there will be much less mention of raw idolatry than of the worship of man, whom the world will make its idol. The idolaters of bygone days worshipped an unknown god in his characteristics of power, goodness, and righteousness. In their imagination they gave this god the form of a man or a beast. The future object of worship will be man. The tendency to this was evident already early in the history of the world empires (Dan. 3: 6-7, 11) and in days past it reached its peak in the deifying of the Roman emperors. But the deified man himself cannot do without a god. The Antichrist, who will demand that he be worshipped as a god, will himself become a worshipper of the powers that Satan will have subjected to him (Dan. 11: 38).

God Cannot Behold Evil

“Art thou not from everlasting, Jehovah my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. Jehovah, Thou hast ordained him for judgment; and Thou, O Rock, hast appointed him for correction. *Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on mischief*” (vv. 12-13).

Although God's Word announced only judgments (vv. 5-10), the prophet's heart overflowed with thankfulness to the Lord. The fellowship with God gave him the assurance that God, his God, was his Holy One, a God who maintained a connection with him, a weak, failing, and ignorant man, who, though a prophet, was scarcely acquainted with His thoughts. That God is “from everlasting” and therefore the God of the promises given to Israel. He took Habakkuk, the representative of His people, in protection. He had given Himself to His prophet, and the prophet belonged to Him. What a privilege when the soul may speak so intimately with God!

How much greater it is for us, who know God as He has revealed Himself fully in Christ, who can say: “My Father, My Lord, My Saviour!

“We shall not die.” How can one doubt any longer that life, eternal life, is our part when one knows such a God personally? Because Habakkuk didn't have, as we do, the full revelation of “the Word of life,” he could not go as far as we. He knew, however, that God's people would not die, that the divine chastening that had come over Israel would not end with its annihilation. He had received the

answer on his first “Why?” and understood what was a mystery for him: The Chaldean had been “ordained” and “appointed” for judgment and chastisement due because of the violence and unrighteousness of the people. For that reason he had been raised up. But this proved that the Rock of ages, “the Rock of Israel,” had not deserted His people for good. When a father chastises his child, it is not to kill it, but to form it according to his own character. This is how God deals with us too, “that we may become partakers of His holiness” (Heb. 12: 10). This is a comforting thought. God acknowledges us as His children when He chastens us. He chastens us precisely because we are His children.

It is, however, impossible for Him to see evil without occupying Himself with it. He must reject it; His eyes are too pure to behold it. In verse 3 the prophet had said: “Why dost Thou cause me to see iniquity, and lookest Thou upon grievance?” Now he had learned that, though God had caused him to see unrighteousness (and how else would he learn to judge it?) God cannot tolerate it in His presence. His eyes can only satisfy themselves with what is perfect and pure and rest on that which is purely good. In the midst of the darkest circumstances, sin, and uncleanness He sees a most humbled Man, Christ, who in the midst of His humiliation was the perfect Man. And in Him His love has found all its pleasure. The prophet also learned in answer to his quest: “Why dost Thou look upon grievance?” that God cannot “look on mischief” (v. 13). What blindness had laid hold on even a prophet that he was unfit to understand this riddle when he had to do with God's government?

How is it that one must know God to understand this? Looking upon evil never leads us to the true knowledge of God, but knowledge of God teaches us about the true character of evil.

Indifference about the Wickedness of the Enemy?

That which the prophet had just learned awakened within him a warm affection for his people. At first he had only been occupied with the terrible condition into which Israel had sunk. Later he understood the interest God had for Israel, and simultaneously he was instructed in the principles of God's governmental ways towards His people. While he enjoyed the fellowship with his God, as we saw in verse 12, he took courage to pose another question: “Wherefore lookest Thou upon them that deal treacherously, *and* keepest silence when the wicked swalloweth up a *man* more righteous than he?” (v. 13). Thou art not able to look upon the misery, the oppression, yet it seems that Thou remainest unmoved toward those who act unfaithfully. Instead of intervening, Thou seemest to be indifferent towards the evil that comes over Thy people, that, though ever so guilty, is more righteous than its enemies.

True enough, there were in Israel not only many wicked things but also some “good things” that the surrounding nations lacked. During the reign of Josiah these good things were present. In fact, Israel was more righteous than its adversaries. The prophet wanted to know the answer to this problem as well. If God observed something good with those who were oppressed by the wicked one, why did He then favour them in their undertakings? There was, however, one thing that the prophet did understand before he received the divine answer: “Thou makest men as the fishes of the sea, as the creeping things, that have no ruler over them” (v. 14).

When God has entrusted a government to men, He has the right to take it entirely away from them and to deliver them as prey to those in whose hands He gives the power. Thus it would soon go with the nations conquered by Babel. The same fate would fall upon Israel, that once stood as one whole under God's government. It had deserted the Lord and would be abandoned without king, without prince, and without help against the enemy (Isa. 63: 19; Hosea 3: 4).

“He taketh up all of them with the hook, he catcheth them in his net, and gathereth them into his

drag; therefore he rejoiceth and is glad: therefore he sacrificeth unto his net, and burneth incense unto his drag; for by them his portion is become fat, and his meat dainty” (vv. 15-16).

The prophet began to understand a little of what was about to happen. He was of one mind with God's thoughts expressed in verse 11: “Whose power is his god.” He saw that the enemy made use of the power that had been entrusted to him to make an idol of his “net” and his “drag.” Well may we ask ourselves whether, though under a different form, things are really different today. And if things are so, “Shall he therefore empty his net, and not spare to slay the nations continually?” (v. 17). The prophet's two great questions concerned therefore God's governmental ways with his people and with the world. In the New Testament the First and the Second Epistles of Peter give an answer to these questions.

The questions of the prophet betray a great confidence toward God. Simultaneously they contain an acknowledgment of ignorance and a strong desire to be taught by Him. He had felt it already before, but would soon fully realize that to know God's ways it is sufficient to know God Himself. Without this knowledge of His Person all that happens in the world will forever remain an unsolvable mystery to us.

Judgment Over the Oppressor, Habakkuk 2.

The Prophet on His Watchtower

“I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will look forth to see what He will say unto me, and what I shall answer as to my reproof” (v. 1).

The Prophet took the place of an observer on “his watchtower,” which means that he took up a position at that place where the enemy would attack his people. Rather than keep far from the matter, he tried to imagine the reality of the coming judgment. He did not assume this position, however, to resist the enemy, for he knew that the word of the Lord would certainly be fulfilled. His observation had a twofold purpose: to see what the Lord would say to him at the threat of the enemy's attack, and what he himself would answer.

Regarding this coming event Habakkuk expected a new revelation from God's thoughts. He had not yet learned all he had to know. Although he was aware that God could not bear Israel's unrighteousness, and that He would judge it by means of the Chaldeans (Hab. 1: 6); he also knew that God could not tolerate the unrighteousness of the Chaldeans. However, he did not know yet what God intended to do.

Above all, how would the Lord be able to deliver the righteous ones who had trusted in Him if He had to judge both the Israelites and the Chaldeans? Habakkuk expected to have to answer, as Moses did in earlier days when the Lord strove with him about Israel after it had made the golden calf (Ex. 32: 7-14; Ex. 33: 12-16). But his intention to present a reply would receive a most definite answer that was beyond dispute. There would be no more room for making even a single remark, as he had intended to do. The second wish of his heart could, therefore, not be realized because he would not meet a God who was going to dispute with him.

From then on he would say: “I heard,” and thank God for his salvation (Hab. 3).

A Not-Sealed Vision

“And Jehovah answered me and said, Write the vision, and engrave it upon tablets, that he may run that readeth it” (v. 2).

God desired that the vision which the prophet would receive would be *written, engraved*, to make it durable, so that it could be kept and read (see also Isa. 30: 8), for it concerned both imminent and future matters of immense significance. Indeed, here Habakkuk did not just receive instructions about the ways of God with His people, as in chapter 1. While learning about the final judgment over the nations and the calamities that would overcome them, he discovered that all things had as their goal *God's honour, the glory of Christ's eternal rule*. And, finally, he learned what the attitude of the righteous had to be while awaiting that rule, and what the great work of redemption is toward them. This vision was not only to be read and well understood, but also to be quickly shared with others, for the time was short.

We believe the significance of the words is: “that he may run that readeth it.” Impressed by the importance of this answer from the Lord, he was forced to go and spread it in the world. Here it was not, as in Daniel, a book that is sealed until the last days (Dan. 12: 4), but a clear, understandable announcement of God's thoughts, meant to be quickly spread everywhere. This vision, that bore an evangelical character, was certainly not to be sealed. Daniel's vision, once sealed, is no longer sealed to the believer; that of Habakkuk, however, has never been sealed.

“For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but it hasteth to the end, and shall not lie” (v. 3).

Doubtless, this vision announced the approaching demise of the Chaldean power which was about to appear on the scene. The time of its activity had been predetermined, but the vision reaches much further: *it speaks of the end*, of the glory of Christ's kingdom. Although these latter things are still future, yet they are perfectly established, for a vision given by God Himself cannot fail. Consequently, He took care to have it engraved on tablets just as He had earlier engraved the law on tables of stone; the law, whose contents was never sealed.

The Ultimate Fulfillment

“Though it tarry, wait for it; for it will surely come, it will not delay” (v. 3).

God's Spirit draws to our attention the fact that the vision speaking about the end can still tarry.

What was announced by it about the Chaldeans has been fulfilled 25 millennia ago. But *the end* of which the vision spoke still tarries. The believer still waits for that glorious time today, building on God's promises. It will *certainly come*. The sign that will announce it is not deceiving. This sign is, as we know, *the coming of the Lord Jesus* in judgment. In Hebrews 10: 37 the apostle Paul applied Habakkuk 2: 3 to the appearance of Christ in the last days when he wrote: “For yet a very little while He that comes will come, and will not delay,” while in Habakkuk it refers to the Chaldeans at a set time.

Once more we remark how the Holy Spirit Himself explains the Word of God; we already saw this in chapter 1, and we will also see it as we continue our study. We, “upon whom the ends of the ages are come” (1 Cor. 10: 11), — who by the cross of Christ have been introduced — receive a much further-reaching explanation of the prophecy than Habakkuk did. We live in the time of the end but have not yet reached the prophetic times. For us the end of the age (dispensation) will begin at *the coming* (parousia) *of the Son of God*. Then the prophetic times will start to run their course and will end with *the appearing* (epiphania) *of the Son of man*, which will introduce Christ's glorious reign on earth (v. 14). Christ is always the goal, the end, the last word of prophecy. This verse, therefore, is also of great importance because it shows us that when prophecy has an historic or partial fulfillment, this fulfillment is never *the last we have heard of it*. Only in the last days will the historical event find its

full and definite significance. Its explanation can only be truly known when we have our eye focused on the person of Christ and the glory that follows upon His suffering (1 Peter 1: 11).

And so, a comparison of Hebrews 10: 37 with Habakkuk 2: 3 totally destroys teaching that rests on the purely historical explanation of the prophecies. It also shows that the Scriptures form one entire whole. We must not consider any passage separate from others. Each part belongs to the whole and God's Spirit explains it according to whether the subject is imminent events or events of the last days. We already saw an example of this in Habakkuk 1: 5, which the apostle explained in Acts 13. Only God's Spirit can explain to us what He has revealed. Man's mind, his spirit, could never presuppose the total bearing of the revelation with which we are dealing, if God's Spirit did not assume the role of teacher. The vision is still tarrying, and soon we will see the reason for this. But its fulfillment will certainly come, and our attitude has to be one of waiting. The Lord is coming. Hebrews 10: 37 does not deal with His *coming* (parousia) for the Church to take up all saints, but with His *appearing* (epiphania) as King, which, just as His coming, is the object of our expectation. For then, Christ's reign on earth, the subject of nearly every Old Testament prophecy, will be introduced, and the faithful ones will receive their crowns.

The Heart of the Book of Habakkuk

“Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright within him” (v. 4)

The promise mentioned in verse 3 is a truth that is completely foreign to all proud men. They lack uprightness. No doubt this is an allusion to the Chaldean, but it is also applicable to every soul who is in the same condition as the Chaldean. Pride makes man unfit for understanding God's thoughts; which are only made known to those who believe. Only faith “is the substantiating of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And so God adds: “But the just shall live by his faith” (v. 4).

This important verse is the heart of the entire book of Habakkuk. It is directed at those who are in the same circumstances as the prophet, for the prophecy can only be understood by *those who are righteous*; the world is totally ignorant of it.

Only when one sees things “by his faith” are they clear, and only righteous ones are able to live this way. The deliverance will certainly come; the glorious reign of Christ will rise like the sun when the obstructions against God have been cast down, obstructions that Satan puts in its way by the glorification of man's pride.

Faith, which on its watchtower observes things, sees that obstruction destroyed and awaits the Lord of glory. Until that moment the righteous one is neither downcast nor without help. His faith sustains him, and that faith feeds his life. This is the bearing of Habakkuk 2: 4b.

But in the New Testament God's Spirit goes much further. Paul's doctrine was entirely permeated by this phrase. Three times he quoted it, and, similar to what we have observed before, each time he gave a different explanation for it. In Romans 1: 17 the issue is *righteousness*, in Galatians 3: 11 it is *faith*, in Hebrews 10: 38 it is *life*. These three words have to do with the teaching contained in each of the epistles referred to. Let us, therefore, consider the particulars of these passages.

1. Romans 1: 16-17. “For I am not ashamed of the glad tidings; for it is God's power to salvation, to every one that believes, both to Jew first and to Greek: for righteousness of God is revealed therein, on the principle of faith, to faith: according as it is written, But the just shall live by faith.”

In verse 16 the apostle began to establish the character of the gospel: God Himself, who acts with

power when man is totally lost. Therefore, where the gospel is brought, God no longer asks anything from man; He does not demand works as a way of straightening things out between him and God. *God* acts; *His power* is working for the benefit of man. Not to help him, but to save him, for this power is for *salvation*. *Faith* is the means whereby one secures salvation, which is for both Jew and Greek. for oneself. The law, given to Israel, is therefore set aside as a means of salvation, and faith has taken its place.

The law did not reach beyond Jewish boundaries, faith reaches far beyond them, for the gospel is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* that believes. The gospel is that power for salvation because God's righteousness (the grand subject of the Epistle to the Romans) is revealed therein. The righteousness of *God*, which stands in the greatest possible contrast to the righteousness of man, is *revealed* therein. It does not demand, as the righteousness of man does. There is no other basis for receiving this righteousness than *faith*. At the very moment faith has received it, it has become "the property of faith." The believer is righteous from that moment on. He possesses a divine righteousness that is not on the basis of human works, for he is only righteous by faith. And if by faith, it is on the basis of pure grace, for only through grace does man come to faith and receive the revelation of righteousness.

This portion from Romans 1 does not yet mention *the work of Christ* as the only means whereby righteousness can become our portion. This cardinal truth is expounded in the remainder of the epistle. Here, only the great fact is established that now an entirely new and absolute righteousness has been revealed and become the possession of faith — the righteousness of God Himself. Therefore Paul quotes Habakkuk: "The just shall live by [or on the basis of] faith." That is, the believer must prove by a life of faith that he possesses this righteousness.

2. Galatians 3: 11. "But that by law no one is justified with God is evident, because The just shall live on the principle of faith; but the law is not on the principle of faith; but, He that shall have done these things shall live by them."

The subject of *the law* — which in Romans 1 was only touched upon as something quite incidental, to receive full light in Chapter 7 — is in the Epistle to the Galatians dealt with in great detail. It is shown in Galatians 3: 10 that all who stand on the basis of the law are under the curse, as declared in Deuteronomy 27: 26. For Israel, the nations under the law, there was only an *Ebal* (curse) and it was deprived of *Gerizim* (blessing). After this, the apostle quoted Habakkuk. He wrote: "that by law no one is justified with God is evident, because "the just shall live on the principle of *faith*." Here, then, faith is put in the forefront, and Paul did not stop there, although he did not lose sight of its link with righteousness or with life. He put faith in juxtaposition with *the law*, which could neither give the one nor the other. Next, he proved that the law is not on the basis of faith because the law pointed to *works* as the means of receiving life or righteousness (Lev. 18: 5; Rom. 10: 5). Finally, he showed how the setting free from the law had been brought about: "Christ has redeemed us out of the curse of the law, having become a curse for us, (for it is written, Cursed *is* every one hanged upon a tree)" (Gal. 3: 13).

3. Hebrews 10: 36-39. "For ye have need of endurance in order that, having done the will of God, ye may receive the promise. For yet a very little while he that comes will come, and will not delay. But the just shall live by faith; and, if he draw back, my soul does not take pleasure in him. But we are not drawers back to perdition, but of faith to saving the soul."

Here Paul quoted the entire verse from Habakkuk. First the words: "For yet a very little while he that comes will come, and will not delay," which Habakkuk ascribed to the Chaldean for a set time.

The apostle applied them to *the last days*, that is to say, to Christ's appearing in glory, not to an event, but to *a person*, to *Him* who will come and not delay.

After this we read the quote: “But the just (or “My just,” meaning, God's just one) shall *live* by faith.” This means that the righteous person shall continue living by faith until the coming of Christ. *Living* by faith is the share of the righteous ones only. It is the great subject of Hebrews 11 in which we see *the life of faith* in all its various characteristics. By faith Abel approached God through faith with a animal sacrifice and was thereby declared righteous; Enoch, who walked with God, was taken away; Noah showed patience, and, while waiting those many years during which the ark was being prepared, preached the righteousness of faith., and finally we see the patriarchs who, living as strangers and pilgrims, waited for a better country. Everywhere the apostle showed that the life of a righteous man is a life by faith that ends in glory.

Difference in Application

In Hebrews 10 the quote from Habakkuk is filled out in a very remarkable way. The prophet had said: “Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright within him: but the just shall live by his faith.” Paul rearranged the sentence: “But the just shall live by faith; and, if he draw back, my soul does not take pleasure in him.” This second part of the sentence, quoted from the Septuagint, agrees with the words: “His soul is puffed up, it is not upright within him.” Paul sets over against each other: the person who “draw[s] back” and the person who “live[s] by faith.” The first one will be lost, perishes; the other saves his life. Habakkuk first presented him who was proudly puffed, and applied this character more to the Chaldean enemy than to any other. The apostle, who used the translation by the Seventy, applied it to the Hebrews who had accepted Christianity, but were in danger of returning to Judaism. He rearranged both sentences to avoid giving ground to the assumption that he had the proud nations in view, as like Habakkuk did. Thereby he wanted to warn the Israelites who had come to know and confess Christianity, but who *did not walk right* as a result of their Jewish pride which promoted holiness-by-works.

Here we have one of the many examples of the use God's Spirit made of an *imperfect*, although not incorrect translation. The Hebrew text of Habakkuk 2: 4 contains a certain vagueness in the words “his soul,” although they are clearly applied to the Chaldean. The soul of one who withdraws to return to the law is never correct. It is always pride which separates him from Christ and grace. Consequently, God has no pleasure in him. He has pleasure in the just one who, by faith, lives humbly before Him.

We cannot stress sufficiently how greatly valuable all these quotes become to us through the different applications the Holy Spirit gives to them. “The just shall live by his faith” is therefore the heart of the Book of Habakkuk. The faith of the prophet had already shown itself in chapter 1: 12, when it dealt with his relationships to God. But that was not all; he had to *live out of it to the end*. The Lord wanted this truth to be set forth in connection with the Chaldean, Israel's enemy.

Pride of the Chaldean

“And moreover, the wine is treacherous: he is a proud man, and keepeth not at rest, he enlargeth his desire as Sheol, and he is like death and cannot be satisfied; and he assembleth unto him all nations, and gathereth unto him all peoples” (v. 5).

This man, the Chaldean, was drunk with self-importance and ambitious desires. He could not be content with achieved successes and he was never satisfied (Prov. 30: 16; Isa. 5: 14). He made himself

the centre of everything, of the people and the nations. Wasn't (and isn't) this from beginning to end, in the past and in the present, the thought, the longing, and the politics of those who lead the nations? Their ambitious egoism prides itself that they consider themselves far above other people, and their wish is that their country may dominate other nations. Fundamentally it is the pride that is prepared to sacrifice everything to own personal greatness. Because of the unfaithfulness of His people God had given the reign to Babel. But He could not allow man to exercise that power apart from Him to satisfy his own ambitious heart that, rather than subject itself to God, was occupied with self.

God would judge him, but we will first see how the curse of all whom he wanted to oppress fell upon him. They would see through his motives, judge his striving, curse his ungodliness and pride. This fifth verse is the introduction to the *song* that now follows.

The “Song of the Curse,” Prelude to the Future Glory (Habakkuk 2: 6-20)

The Final Answer to Habakkuk

The song of the curse is truly a poem. It consists of five strophes each of three lines, each strophe, except the fifth which deviates a little, begins with the words “Woe (un)to him.” The third line of the first four strophes begins with the word “for” (or “because”) and gives the impression of the old round-dances, since they draw the conclusion of the “Woe to him,” that is announced in the first two lines (cf. Ex. 15: 20-21). “Shall not all these take up a proverb about him, and a taunting riddle against him?” (v. 6). Our attention is drawn to the fact that it has not the simple significance of a curse uttered by the oppressed against their oppressors.

This song against the Chaldean brings us to the last days. The king who is its subject is not mentioned once, for the characteristics with which he is presented are not those of him alone. It is a *proverb*, a *symbolic portrayal*, that is to be understood, a *riddle* that needs to be solved; it leads us toward the establishment of Christ's glorious reign. In some respects the words “Woe to him” remind us of those we find in Isaiah 5 and Micah 2: 1-2. But those are directed to Israel, whereas these are meant for the nations and their heads. This song about Babel and its king is the final answer of the Lord to the second “Why” of the prophet, and concerns the oppressor of his people (ch. 1: 13).

To His servant, who on his watchtower looked for what the Lord would speak to him, God had first answered that faith was the first prerequisite for the just. Faith was not to expect the *immediate* punishment of the evil, for one must live by faith, with patience, and not count on an imminent realization of the things one hopes for. And indeed *faith is that assurance* until it is exchanged for sight.

The First Strophe

“Woe to him that increaseth that which is not his! how long? — and to him that loadeth himself with pledges! Shall they not rise up suddenly that shall bite thee, and they awake up that shall vex thee, and thou shalt be for booties unto them? Because thou hast plundered many nations, all the rest of the peoples shall plunder thee; because of men's blood, and for the violence *done* to the land, to the city, and all that dwell therein” (vv. 6-8).

The first “Woe” is pronounced over him who collects the possessions of others, goods that do not belong to him. He loads himself with a burden of goods that he pledges against usury. The same things had taken place in Israel (Amos 2: 6-8). The play on words — “pledges” or “thick mud” — indicates

that this detestable looting could only lead to shame for the Chaldean, that he would reap no other “advantage” than contempt because of the lowness of his act. Such behaviour is something abominable in God's eyes. How much retribution could the leaders spare themselves and the nations over which they rule if they realized the lowness of such deeds!

The “how long” from the mouths of the singing oppressed ones seems to correspond to what the prophet himself had said regarding Israel (ch. 1: 2). Here the nations utter this cry.

Through faith Habakkuk had learned to exercise patience. He knew that the vision would not deceive. However, the nations that would be spared had to wait too for the fulfillment of this hope. The man who, to enrich himself, laid hold of others' goods would suddenly be attacked by those he had robbed. They would bite him as a thief jumped upon by dogs, and in turn he would fall prey to them (v. 7). Verse 8 is the sequence to and confirmation of the preceding. This man had plundered; the remnant of the nations that will be spared to experience Christ's ascension to the throne (for let us not forget that Babel's fall is but a symbol of what will take place in the last days) will in turn rob the plunderer.

This revenge will not only find its reason in the shed blood of men, but also in “the violence *done* to the land, to the city, and all that dwell therein” by this vicious nation. About the unrighteousness of his own nation the prophet had cried: “Violence” and “how long?” God had answered him that Israel would be punished for this violence by the Chaldean. Therefore, the moment would come that the nations would revenge the violence of the Chaldean against Israel. Thus, in God's governmental ways, the one revenge follows the other. Doubtless, “the land, the city, and all that dwell therein” refers to Palestine, Jerusalem, and its inhabitants. It seems, therefore, unnecessary to supply the numerous proofs of this. God never loses sight of His people. The unrighteous acts of the Chaldean, the looting and murder of which he had been guilty toward the nations would be righteously revenged. How much the more then when his violent acts were poured out over Israel. God had to temporarily set His people aside, but He will again renew His relationship with them as soon as the judgments are passed. He never forgets those who truly belong to Him. When it pleases Him to chasten them, then woe to those who, in doing so, pursue their own advantage.

Second Strophe

“Woe to him that getteth iniquitous gain to his house, that he may set his nest on high, that he may be delivered from the grasp of evil! Thou hast devised shame to thy house, by cutting off many peoples, and hast sinned against thine own soul. For the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it” (vv. 9-11).

In these verses the enemy is accused of having made unrighteous gain with the purpose of building a safe house for himself that had not to fear any disaster (see Jer. 22: 13). In this way he wanted to prevent all evil. In vain, for the disaster, the “woe,” would fall upon him anyway. Although each can apply these accusations to himself, they are from a to z directed to the great powers. Upon them lies a terrible and heavy responsibility. In history we see again and again that governmental leaders invade forcefully the territory of other nations, conquering it so as to enlarge their power. They thereby create the greatness of their own house by means of what they have exorted from others; they build their nest high. Did not Napoleon, and so many other emperors with him, strive to extend their power at the cost of others? The same pride drove Edom to built its nest between the stars (Obadiah 1: 4). In the final analysis all such plans do not have any other result than the demise and shame of such ambitious rulers. They discovered that they had sinned against their own soul (v. 10). Every stone, every beam of this beautiful edifice that by ambition and pride was founded on deceit became a living

testimony against the oppressor. In contrast, the believer who wants to serve God never thinks of enlarging his house. His joy and his honour consist in this, that he, like David, gathers the building materials for *the house of his God*. So did Solomon, Joash, and Josiah to enlarge the temple of the Lord, to make it firm and strong (1 Kings 5: 18; 2 Kings 12: 12; 22: 5-6).

Third Strophe

“Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and establisheth a city by unrighteousness! Behold, is it not of Jehovah of hosts that the peoples labour for the fire, and the nations weary themselves in vain? For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Jehovah as the waters cover the sea” (vv. 12-14).

The first “woe” spoke of the nation, the second of the “house”; the third has the capital as its subject. That is not “*the city*” (Jerusalem), as in verse 8, but *a city, a town*. In its direct application to the Chaldean this portion refers to Babel, that was founded on the slaughter of the nations and the blood of men. This was true too of Nineveh (Nahum 3: 1). All this raging of those nations would find its end in the judgment. Their exertion would have no other result than their demise; nothing of it would remain: they “weary themselves in vain.” Isn't it a serious thought that all glory, the riches, the beauty, with which the capitals are adorned, will have to vanish and sink into nothingness? Faith, however, understands this “riddle,” it understands the reason for all these turn-about. The everlasting kingdom of Christ can only be established when all evil has been judged. To establish this realm unrighteousness must disappear, all that exalts itself against the Ruler of the whole earth must be cast down and brought low. The way of the Lord can only be prepared by the bringing low of every high mountain (Isa. 40: 3-5). Then the whole world will know the glory of the Lord and be filled with it. Evil will, as it were, be drowned in the depths of the sea. Again and again the Lord has announced that these things will take place despite the judgments that He of necessity had to mete out. In a single verse (v. 14) we find here a sketch of the glorious millennial reign of Christ which the prophet Isaiah described in great detail. It will be the time of “the restoration of all things, of which God has spoken by the mouth of His holy prophets since time began” (Acts 3: 21).

Fourth Strophe

“Woe unto him that giveth his neighbour drink, - that pourest out thy flask, and makest *him* drunken also, that thou mayest look on their nakedness! Thou art filled with shame instead of glory; drink thou also, and let thy foreskin be uncovered: the cup of Jehovah's right hand shall be turned unto thee, and a shameful spewing shall be on thy glory. For the violence *done* to Lebanon shall cover thee, and the destruction of beasts which made them afraid; because of men's blood, and for the violence *done* to the land, to the city, and all that dwell therein” (vv. 15-17).

This strophe describes the low and shameful abandon that characterised the Chaldean nation. How can one speak of his *glory*, when the choir has just sung of the *glory of the Lord*? “Thou art filled with shame instead of glory.” “A shameful spewing shall be on thy glory,” so is the cry full of mocking bitterness and revengeful anger. All these corrupting things are accompanied by *violence*, for since Adam's fall these evils have always supported and augmented each other among men who have united themselves into fellowships (Gen. 6: 11-13).

The glory of the Lord will cover the earth, but the violence of man will not be forgotten; it will fall upon him and cover him. Violence (notice how this word is so often repeated) will be answered with violence, as we have already seen in chapter 1. And the choir adds by way of refrain what the

Lord feels when His land, His city, and its inhabitants are the target of the enemy's violence (v. 8).

The prophet Isaiah did not put this song about the king of Babel on the lips of the nations, but on those of Israel itself that would exult when the pride of Babel's king would descend into hades and his scepter would be broken. The cedars of Lebanon rejoiced over him and said: "Since thou art laid down, no feller is come up against us....Thy pomp is brought down to Sheol, the noise of thy lyres: the maggot is spread under thee, and worms cover thee" (Isa. 14: 8, 11).

Fifth Strophe

What profiteth the graven image that the maker thereof hath graven it? the molten image, and the teacher of falsehood, that the maker of his work dependeth thereon, to make dumb idols? Woe unto him that saith to the wood, Awake! to the dumb stone, Arise! Shall it teach? Behold it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in the midst of it. But Jehovah is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him!" (vv. 18-20).

As we mentioned already, the fifth strophe differs from the others. The reason for this is, I suppose, to be found in the fact that God is directly involved in the matter. The boundless pride of Babel's king had exalted itself against the Lord Himself, no longer against the nations, or even against the people of God. Over against the only true God he had put his deceiving images of wood, iron, silver, and gold. And this became the main cause for his definite destruction. It is remarkable that in this entire allegory the Spirit of God carefully hides the name of the king of Babel. It is a "riddle" that far exceeds the historical judgment over the Chaldean, reaching to the time of Christ's glorious reign.

From the Book of Revelation we know that in the last days another Babylon will appear on the stage as a last unfolding of idolatry. Her golden cup will be full of abominations (or idols), and the Roman Empire, the last form of the great world empires, will insist on the same idolatrous demands as the head of the first realm with the golden head (Rev. 17: 4; 13: 14-15; Dan. 3: 1). This idolatry is branded as a shameful spot by all prophets (see Isa. 44: 9-20; Jer. 2: 27; 3: 9, etc.).

It is remarkable that here the "peoples and nations" (Hab. 2: 5-6) pronounce the "woe" over those who adhere to the idols, that *they* proclaim the vanity of the gentile religions. This is due to the fact that their song is a song of the last days, after they have abandoned their earlier gentile religion to turn to the true God and to recognize His kingdom. The last Babylon is silently included in this symbolic presentation. Therefore the song ends with acknowledging the Lord as the only One whom the nations worship. Not only will *the knowledge of His glory* cover the entire renewed earth (v. 14), but *the knowledge of Himself*. He will be "in His holy temple," in His temple at Jerusalem; for these words do not refer to heaven, but to His house on earth (Micah 1: 2; Ps. 11: 4). From that moment on, the glory of the Lord that had left the temple (Ezek. 11: 23) will have returned (Ezek. 43: 4). The entire earth will be silent before Him. He will rule and because of His majesty no one will dare to raise a voice in His presence. This truly is a worthy conclusion of the song of the nations who will from that moment on be subjected to His power.

How must the anxious heart of the prophet have been comforted by this vision of future events. In it he foresaw the outcome of a faith that has learned to wait patiently for the end of God's ways: the pride of man brought low, the nations delivered and subjected to Him, the nation Israel restored, the Lord, who makes Jerusalem and His temple the centre of His glory, praised, and all creatures silent before Him. It caused the prophet to forget to "answer" (2: 1). How could he, now that God, instead of chiding him, caused to pass before his eyes His righteousness in the judgment over evil; His grace toward His people that He will also show in the restoration of the nations; and finally, His glory which

will cover the whole earth during a reign of righteousness and peace for which the entire world will only be able to keep silent!

Habakkuk's Prayer — Habakkuk 3

God Heard

“A Prayer of Habakkuk the prophet upon Shigionoth”¹ (v. 1).

The prophet summarized the conclusion of all that he had heard from the mouth of the Lord in a *prayer* that was simultaneously a plea, a thanksgiving, and a psalm of praise. It proceeded from a faith that was fully assured that the Lord would be faithful to His promises. This prayer consists of four parts.

The first part is contained in the second verse.

“Jehovah, I heard the report of Thee, *and* I feared. Jehovah, revive Thy work in the midst of the years, in the midst of the years make *it* known: In wrath remember mercy!”

In chapter 1: 2 the prophet had said: “Jehovah, how long shall I cry and *Thou wilt not hear?* I cry out unto Thee...” How could he ever have expressed such words: “Thou wilt not hear”? In all the instructions the Lord gave him afterwards, He showed him that He had heard and always hears. With near fatherly feelings He made it clear to him that the judgments which He had to allow over *His people* and over *the enemies of His people* were righteous judgments. However, God also showed him that *the righteous* is not without help while going through the judgments, for he shall live by his faith. Finally God declared to him that in a future day He will be glorified and personally highly praised, and the whole earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord's glory.

Therefore the prophet could say: “I heard”; not: “Thou hast heard,” for his question had resulted from his weak faith. Now, however, he had knowledge of God's thoughts. The Lord had given this to him, and he did not have to wait for His governmental ways before he could understand them. Through faith he had come to know them already.

Yet, at the announcements of these judgments he said, “And I feared.” Indeed, God's judgments are terrible, they must fill the heart with a wholesome fear! Still one thing he wanted to ask: Revive Thy work of grace toward Thy people! “In the midst of the years,” before the end time of which Thou didst speak. Act in mercy toward us!

The deliverance out of Egypt constituted “the beginning of years,” in which the Lord had shown His work of grace on behalf of His people. The prophet desired that God would take it up again before He would give deliverance *at the end of years* which would introduce the Millennium. He knew that he lived in the time of wrath.

This was all the more a reason to call upon God's mercy, for just when He pours out His judgments over the world we ought to trust His grace, today as much as in the past. The prophetic prayer of Habakkuk will be answered at the revival of Israel, more particularly toward the faithful remnant of which the prophet was a type.

The Salvation of the Lord

The *second part* is contained in the verses 3 to 15. It describes the deliverances of the Lord in the

past and His intervention in favour of His people in the last days.

The *first section of the second part* is covered in verses 3-6. “God came from Teman, and the Holy One from mount Paran. Selah. His glory covereth the heavens, and the earth is full of His praise. And *His* brightness was as the light; rays *came forth* from His hand; and there was the hiding of His power. Before Him went the pestilence, and a burning flame went forth at His feet” (vv. 3-5). Here the Exodus from Egypt is described. These verses show us the Lord coming from the east, from Teman and the mountains of Paran which dominate the wilderness known by that name, in short, from Edom's territory. He comes to the aid of His people, to deliver it out of the bondage of Egypt by the destruction of the nations who oppressed it and resisted Israel.

Deuteronomy 33: 2 says that the Lord came from Sinai, out of Seir and from Paran to deliver His people and to give them the law. According to Judges 5: 4 Deborah sang about the Lord's intervention, coming from Seir, to destroy the enemies of His people. We find the same in Psalm 18: 8-20, but there it concerns more particularly the enemies of the last days. Psalm 68 identifies the deliverance out of Egypt with that of the people in the last days. Psalm 77 draws out of the deliverance from Egypt the confidence that the Lord will deliver His people in the time of the Great Tribulation. And so, all these portions, just as Habakkuk's prayer, sing of God's past intervention to save His people as an earnest of the deliverance in the last days.

“He stood, and measured the earth; He beheld, and discomfited the nations; and the eternal mountains were scattered, the everlasting hills gave way: His ways are everlasting” (v. 6). The nations who sought to resist Israel were scattered, the power of ancient Egypt broken. The eternal hills — picturing the authorities established by God Himself, whose rule should therefore have been of unlimited duration — gave way before Him who came from His holy mountain to deliver His people. The prophet adds: “His ways are everlasting.”

What assurance gives this thought to faith! What God has done in the past, He will also do in the future; with Him “is no variation nor shadow of turning” (James 1: 17).

Whether it is a question of judgment or of deliverance, God's ways of righteousness and of life are ever the same, reaching “unto the bounds of the everlasting hills” (Gen. 49: 26).

Comparing Past and Future Deliverance

The *second section of the second part* is covered in verses 7-15. In these verses we find a comparison between the future deliverance and that out of Egypt, which was only a weak picture of the former.

“I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction; the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble” (v. 7). With awe the prophet thought of the events that still had to take place, but which he in *his vision* saw as already having taken place. The territories of Cush to the West and to the North, Arabia to the East and the South, will tremble before the Lord. The past deliverance when Israel went out of Egypt did not by any means stretch as far as the here-described future deliverance.

“Was Jehovah wrathful with the rivers? Was Thine anger against the rivers? Was Thy rage against the sea, That Thou didst ride upon Thy horses, Thy chariots of salvation?” (v. 8). God will do away with the boundaries of the nations, He Himself will slay them in their confusion. But when He will act in this manner, His purpose is not just judgment, for His chariots are “chariots of salvation.” Certainly, the judgments will have to run their course until the end, the stripes foretold by God's Word come down upon the nations and their boundaries are obliterated (v. 9). The governmental authorities

will be terrified, the whole world will utter cries of fear, while the people will in vain lift up their hands in the midst of the flood of judgments that will be poured out over them (v. 10). Nothing will be able to stay the Lord's battle against the godless until they are completely consumed. It will be as it was in the days of Joshua: "And the sun stood still, and the moon remained where it was, until the nation had avenged themselves upon their enemies" (v. 11; Joshua 10: 13).

Moreover, God's wrath will not spare *the land*, Israel's territory. The unbelieving and apostate part of the people will, like the nations, receive the stripes of the Lord's indignation (v. 12).

Salvation, deliverance for Israel, will be the result of this tremendous flood of disasters: "Thou wentest forth for the salvation of Thy people, for the salvation of thine anointed; Thou didst smite off the head from the house of the wicked, laying bare the foundation even to the neck" (v. 13). Isn't this a wonderful thing? To such degree will that small nation — and even then only represented by a small, insignificant remnant — be the object of the loving care of the almighty God, that He will bring the whole world in turmoil to save that nation. It is, because Israel is *His anointed*: He has put the seal of His Spirit upon it; He wants to have it near Him as partaker of His glory in the centre of a reign wherein His eternal righteousness will rule. The *true* Israel may be little in the eyes of men; in the day in which He exercises His authority it will be His "precious jewel."

Here we do not speak of the Assembly, the bride of the Lamb, whose blessings exceed those of Israel as far as the heavens are above the earth. The Old Testament never speaks about this bride. Our heart is interested in "the Jewish bride," because Christ, the Lord, her Messiah and King, has such interest in her. With pleasure He looks upon her as His precious jewel. All His promises made before — which to Him were always without repentance — He will fulfill. No matter how great Israel's unfaithfulness may have been, the heart of the King is not changed toward His people. Though He had to cast her off for a time as an unfaithful wife, He will receive her again after He has purified her in the fire of judgment by the Great Tribulation which caused the heart of the prophet to tremble in anticipation. The thought expressed in verse 13 we find back in that beautiful portion of Isaiah where we see the Lord coming out of Edom, from Bozrah, with His great power. He has trodden the winepress alone, treading the nations in His fury; and then He says: "For the day of vengeance was in My heart, and the year of My redeemed had come" (Isa. 63: 1-6).

Then will "the head from the house of the wicked" be smitten, and "the foundation even to the neck [the last stone]" be laid bare (v. 13). These words refer doubtless to the Chaldean who had founded his house on unrighteousness. They carry our thoughts, however, to the "godless one" of the last days whose house will also be destroyed from the rooftop to the foundation.

And so it is with verse 14 in which the last conflict is described. All nations will rush in to scatter this poor, tested, powerless remnant and to devour it in a secret place. In our expositions of the prophets we have more than once brought it to the reader's attention that the nations of the last days will not publicize their plans. In secret they will decide to snatch their prey from their allies of one day. But when Christ appears, it will be sufficient that the horses of this mighty Warrior show themselves to break through and destroy the tremendous might stirred up by Satan against Him and His people. Revelation 19: 11-16 gives more details of this battle scene. There we see it from its heavenly perspective, something the Old Testament never does.

Rest Today and in the Future

The *third part* is contained in verse 16.

“I heard, and my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice; rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in my place, that I might rest in the day of distress, when their invader shall come up against the people.”

This verse is the conclusion and summary of what has been said in the previous verses. In verse 2 we read what the prophet had heard and how it had caused him to be frightened when he thought of the Divine wrath. Then he had interceded for the people to remind the Lord of His mercies. The entire scene of the last days had then passed before his eyes. He had been reminded of the judgments that once had been executed over Egypt and over all Israel's enemies when God wanted to deliver His people. Next his prophetic vision had dwelled on the judgments of the last days, and he had understood that these had only *the salvation* of the God's people in view, just as in earlier days. This all he had seen and accepted as reality. Yet, that did not stop him from trembling to his bones, even more than he had done at the beginning of his song. It was with him as it had been with Daniel who said, when he saw “the great vision,” “And my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength” (Dan. 10: 8). This is a necessary preparation for receiving prophetic information in order to enter into the thoughts of God. Therefore the angel had comforted Daniel: “Fear not, man greatly beloved; peace be unto thee, be strong, yea, be strong” (Dan. 10: 19).

And so it is in this concisely presented scene. Habakkuk trembled; it was as if the entire judgment was poured out over himself, yet he was at rest while awaiting the day of distress. A similar work of the conscience, this feeling of total incapability and this conviction that our nature is corrupt, are unavoidable if we are to find rest, whether it concerns the history of men in the past, the present, or the future. Here it is a question of rest in the future. The prophet wished it to Israel in *the day of distress*, *the day of the Great Tribulation*, in which the enemy would come up against the people.

From numerous places in the prophets we know who that enemy will be, which armies will come up against Jerusalem. The prophet was sure of the eventual deliverance and the lasting rest. However, the Word presents here a rest that can be enjoyed *ahead of time*. It is the rest of soul even in the midst of the most sorrowful tribulations. That is a peace that can only be obtained once one has learned to judge oneself totally and after one has come to know God's love and mercy.

Full Fellowship with the Lord

The *fourth part* is contained in verses 17-19.

“For though the fig-tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive-tree shall fail, and the fields shall yield no food; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in Jehovah, I will joy in the God of my salvation. Jehovah, the Lord, is my strength, and He maketh my feet like hinds' *feet*, and He will make me to walk upon my high places.

In this fourth part of the song we find the *faith* of the prophet beautifully put into words. Since the beginning of his conversations with the Lord his faith had steadily increased. He expected a future deliverance (see v. 16).

But he also knew that this deliverance could still tarry. His faith answered therefore to the word: “Though it tarry, wait for it” (2: 3). He therefore waited for it in the assurance that the deliverance would be *preceded by distress*.

For him, however, there would be in the midst of this breaking loose of the storm, a safe secure hiding place, a little sanctuary, where he could find the rest of the presence of the Lord. That hope

sufficed him. He knew that the rest would come as soon as the distress was passed. But what was he to do at present? It was a time a great scarcity that mirrored the spiritual condition of the Jewish people in our days. The fig-tree, the vine, and the olive-tree are without fruit — all symbols of that nation. Nothing is produced for God. Wheat, sheep, cattle, everything is lacking; there is even no longer a sacrifice to establish communion between Israel and God.

In Christendom it is not any better. Everywhere there is scarcity and hunger on the Christian terrain; great weakness of the Christian testimony; a confession without life and without communion with God.

“Yet...” adds the prophet. He lived by his faith and had accepted the promised deliverance as if it was already his. He did, however, not rejoice in the rest that he had not yet reached, not even in *the salvation*. He had a much higher joy: he possessed the Lord Himself, the God of his salvation. Him in whom he rejoiced and would always rejoice was the God who did not hide anything from him, who acted toward him as a friend, who made his most secret thoughts known to him. He could count on His mercy, even when all would fail, because He is the God whose blessings endure forever. “We will be glad and rejoice in Thee,” said the Shulamite bride, “We will remember Thy love more than wine” (Song 1: 4). Thus God gives songs in the night (Job 35: 10). These experiences gave the prophet *full fellowship* with the Lord. At first he had understood that “the Lord, His God and holy One,” is *light* and that He is “of purer eyes than to behold evil” (1: 12-13). Now he rejoiced himself *in Him*, he enjoyed all the perfection of His person, and understood the *love* of “the God of my salvation.”

But the Lord was not only his *joy*, He was also the prophet's *strength* (v. 19) when he was powerless. “Blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee” (Ps. 84: 5). Thanks to Him our feet are made as hind's feet during a time of utmost weakness, when as yet not a single promise for the future has been fulfilled. We may rise up to our high places and walk through them with light, joyful, quick, and free steps. The heavenlies are for us, believers of today, the terrain where we find ourselves in Christ. What does scarcity mean to those who enjoy all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies?

Worship

“To the Chief Musician. On my stringed instruments” (19).

How could we then wonder about it that during those disastrous times Habakkuk rediscovered worship as in the days of David and Solomon. He handed his song over to the Chief Musician to sing it accompanied with harp and lyre. Here he realized even beforehand the song of praise that Israel will sing in a future day in His restored temple. And don't we have the same privilege? The certain knowledge that the things of earth are nothing drives us to the Lord, and when we then rejoice in the boundless, unfathomable riches, only one thought overpowers our whole being: to cast ourselves at His feet and to worship Him! The worship of God's children may be found anew in the midst of the ruin of Christendom.

We want to close this exposition with the words of another who said about the prophecy of Habakkuk:

“There is nothing finer than this development of the thoughts of the Spirit of God, the sorrows and anxieties produced by Him, the answer of God to give understanding and strengthen faith, in order that the heart may be in full communion with Himself” (Habakkuk by JND).

Summary

Habakkuk occupied a very special place among the prophets, although Jeremiah as far as his personal experiences are concerned, resembled him in certain aspects. Yet, Jeremiah's horizon stretched further. Initially, Habakkuk rebelled against the regime of violence among his people; he cried: "How long?" But as soon as the Lord announced the judgment over Israel by the Chaldeans the heart of this man was deeply moved for his people. Like Moses he pleaded as mediator with the Lord for Israel. God answered that He would judge the Gentiles who were the rod in His hand. But Habakkuk learned a personal lesson that is at all times and under all circumstances of great value: "The just shall live by his faith." Faith was the only principle on which he had to lean even in the most evil day. This verse is the kernel, the centre of the entire prophecy. From this moment on, his faith fathomed the "why" of the judgments. He viewed the past deliverances, realizing those of the future, and went through the present tribulations with an unmixed joy that clung to the person of the Redeemer with the power that God Himself was for him, and with the unconstrained, happy joy of the eternal blessings. Enriched with such blessing the man of faith had found entrance to the sanctuary, which he entered to bring worship to God.

The path of faith is most glorious, for it raises us above all hindrances, *even above our personal experiences*, and fixes our eyes on the things that are not seen, "for the things that are seen *are* for a time, but those that are not seen eternal" (2 Cor. 4: 18).