

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE MINOR PROPHETS - PART EIGHT - THE BOOK OF HABAKKUK

**THEME** In an intriguing way these last four minor prophets we have studied illustrate the four principles of missionary work set out in Matt.10 when Jesus sent the twelve on their first outreach; He called them,(v.1 - Jonah) He gave them authority,(v.1 - Micah) He sent them out,(v.5 - Nahum) and He told them what to say,(v.5 - Habakkuk). The theme of this book is the message of a witness of Christ - justification by faith alone. Habakkuk's name means 'embrace' and is a further reminder that salvation is the result of a loving God reaching out to draw us to Himself, on the basis of the only possible merit, that of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND** is not known for certain because the book does not date itself. The Chaldeans(1:6) only rose as a military power late in the 7th century B.C.; the temple(2:20) was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.; presumably the book was written between these events most likely in the reign of Josiah, 639-609 B.C. In that case II Chron.34,35 and II Kings 22,23 provide the Old Testament background. During Josiah's time the scriptures were rediscovered while spring cleaning the temple; under his leadership the Word of God was again taken seriously and a nationwide spiritual revival resulted. Habakkuk would have been delighted. Tragically in 609 B.C. Josiah was killed by an Egyptian army he tried to stop passing through his country on their way to join the Assyrians against the Chaldeans - a quarrel in which he had no need to be involved. From that point on Judah went spiritually and politically downhill and so into Babylonian captivity 23 years later. It is an attractive guess that it was this seemingly pointless disaster that prompted Habakkuk's outburst(1:2) in which he could be questioning God's competence in allowing such a thing to happen. All of us have at times done the same in the face of some personal or national tragedy where God's apparent lack of action seems to have set back His cause - and our happiness.

**NEW TESTAMENT QUOTATIONS.** One phrase from Hab.2:4 is used no less than three times in the New Testament.

1. In Rom.1:17, "But the righteous man shall live by faith." is the key to the whole book. It is the gospel. In Romans 1-4 Paul shows how by faith in the death of Christ we can be counted righteous, justified, before God. In chapters 5-8 his message is of how by faith we can also be righteous before men because of the risen and indwelling Christ.

2. In Gal.3:11 Paul is again explaining that there is only one way to escape the 'curse of the law' because the Bible standard shows us how totally we fail of ourselves to live up to God's demands of man, and how there is only one way to live the Christian life. Hab.2:4 is once more the heart of his message.

3. In Heb.10:37,38 the quotation is of the whole of Hab. 2:3,4. The writer is reassuring those who face persecution for their faith that Christ will return, but meanwhile the problems of today are to be overcome by faith that produces righteous living whatever the pressures.

The Lord adapts Hab.2:11 in Luke 19:40 to tell the critical Pharisees that if His disciples ceased to point people to Him, the inanimate creation would have to acknowledge its Creator. The message must be heard, with or without man.

Paul uses part of Hab.3:18 with minor variation in both Rom.5:2 and Phil.4:4. In each passage he is developing the idea that the 'how' of Christian living is to exult or rejoice in all that Christ is in us in the face of the most intense pressures of life whether from within or without. Exulting or rejoicing is the conscious reviewing of and counting upon our riches in Christ. Our spiritual riches do not have to be begged from God by the Christian because all that heaven has to give has already been lavished upon us in Christ.(Eph. 1:3) This is a vital part of the Christian message yet it is so often neglected and unknown. Habakkuk was determined that it should not be so in his day.

**THE OLD TESTAMENT** is used by Habakkuk in a number of ways.

TEMAN(Hab.3:3) was the capital of Edom(Amos 1:12 and Obad.9) whom we have already seen as a nation that typified the natural man, supposing himself secure in his self-sufficiency. The natural man's message is that we can be righteous without God. Edom was soon to learn the hard way. Jeremiah at much the same period of time was asking Edom why he no longer had anything to say.(Jer. 49:7)

MT.PARAN(Hab.3:3) was the location for Moses' sermons to the Israelites before his death and their entry into the land of Canaan. These sermons make up the book of Deuteronomy whose theme is how we can possess our possessions in Christ. In Deut.33:2 Mt.Paran is put on a level in importance with Sinai as a place from which God's message had been delivered.

MIDIAN(Hab.3:7), in passages such as Judges 6-8, is an enemy who overwhelmed Israel not by notable leadership but by sheer weight of numbers, and could well therefore be a reminder of the world who swamp a defeated church by their all pervasive influence. Yet it is to be throughout the same world that a church, enjoying all it has in Christ, is to go with His message.

Hab.2:14 quotes Isa.11:9 in anticipating the exciting day when just that has happened.

THE ROCK(Hab.1:12) draws on one of the familiar symbols used to describe God in the Old Testament,(Deut. 32:4) and God the Son in the New Testament.(I Cor.10:4) The message we Christians have is of how He is the only solid, unchanging foundation on which our lives can be built.(Matt.7:24; 16:18 and I Cor.3:11)

Hab.3 draws on numerous Psalms as Habakkuk's original complaint because of man's need becomes a hymn of praise at the wonder and simplicity of God's message in answer.

### AN OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

1:1 Introduction - what Habakkuk learned from God.

1:2-4 Why don't You do something, Lord, to stop the wicked pushing the righteous around? If we are to find any answer to our doubts about suffering we must be honest to express them frankly to God, not just to ourselves.

1:5-11 God's answer - I am doing something. Firstly in eternity where sin and suffering is already dealt with. Secondly on earth I am at work in so many ways to which you have been blind. Remember that the root cause of man's suffering is that he tries to live in his own strength - like the Chaldeans.

1:12 - 2:1 Habakkuk argues back. Yes, I know that everything will be fine after death, up there where You are in heaven, but I am down here on earth where the wicked are still getting away with it! They beat up the righteous and then dare to give their god the credit. I bet I get into trouble for saying this!

2:2-20 God answers again. Get this straight and make your message so clear that even people in the 21st century will be able to read it as they speed down their motorways. The righteous will live by his faith. Unrighteousness is not just violence in the streets but pride,(v.4) greed,(v.5) speculation,(v.6) depending on material security,(v.9) using people,(v.12) permissiveness,(v.15) and worshipping our own skills and technology(v.18).

3:1-19 Habakkuk's final response. I have got it! You want to deal with the violence in me first. Then You can again have a mouthpiece for Your message to the world at large. You have proved this again and again throughout the Old Testament and You wait to prove this now in me. Thank You for what You have done for me - now I am ready to go anywhere You send me!

### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. The last three books have dealt with 3 aspects of the work of a missionary - his call, his authority and his motivation. What according to Matt.10:1-5 is the other vital area which still remains to be explained?
2. What at your first reading through of the book of Habakkuk does it seem to be about?
3. What does the name Habakkuk mean? How does the meaning of his name fit the theme of his book?
4. Which part of this book is quoted three times in the New Testament? What is the common idea each time? Where else is Habakkuk quoted in the New Testament? How do these passages also add to our understanding of his book?
5. What clues can you find to the likely date of Habakkuk's writing? What events in Kings and Chronicles would therefore be the background to the book? How do these events help to explain his message?
6. What people, places and familiar Old Testament symbols are used in this book? How do they help to illustrate the message of Habakkuk?
7. Chapter 3 is a collection of verses from different Psalms? How do they build together into a common theme? What does this chapter show about how to write hymns and their use in Christian work?
8. Give an outline of the dialogue in the book between Habakkuk and God. Show how Habakkuk is brought finally to understand the gospel.