

THE PROPHETIC WORD IN CRISIS DAYS

Prophetic Messages Delivered at the West Coast Prophetic Congress
in the Los Angeles, Calif. area in mid-1961

by

Various Contributors

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CHAPTER SIX

THE CRISIS OF THIS PRESENT HOUR

PAUL R. BAUMAN

The present hour is indeed a crisis hour. The one word which most adequately characterizes our day is the word "crisis." The awareness of crisis is universal in this mid-twentieth century world. Crisis conditions have gripped almost every nation on the globe, and have spread into every realm of human endeavor. Even the people of God today are feeling the burden of crisis as never before, and in moments of wavering faith many find themselves wondering whether God is still on the throne.

It is comforting to know that devout people have in past centuries been afflicted with this same sense of frustration.

The prophet Habakkuk faced a situation in his day which bore striking similarity to that which prevails in the present hour of crisis. He was a man who was dominated by a passion to see the righteousness of God vindicated. Viewing with holy awe the vicious storm of human rebellion which seemed to beat upon the foundations of the very throne of God in his day, Habakkuk was deeply puzzled by the fact that divine justice was not being administered. This was a tremendous problem to Habakkuk, and when no human solution was to be found he finally took his burden to the Lord.

The prophecy of Habakkuk opens with the heart cry of the impatient prophet:

"The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see. O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth" (Habakkuk 1:1-4).

In the study of Old Testament prophecy the word "**burden**" always presages a message of divine judgment.

Such a message is a burden to the heart of the man of God who must deliver it, as well as to those to whom it is directed. The term suggests that the message weighs heavily upon the souls of men.

In studying the history of the Old Testament we find that Habakkuk was writing in a time of unparalleled prosperity in his own country. Yet he was living in a day of moral laxity and spiritual apostasy. It was a day of corruption in the courts and of criminal violence and of social chaos. The real problem in the mind of the prophet arose from his observation of these abuses. Reflecting on the lofty disclosures of God's righteousness in days gone by, Habakkuk simply could not understand his silence and forbearance.

It is recorded in the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy that God promised blessing to Israel as a reward of obedience, and severe chastening as a reward of disobedience. That portion of Scripture had been the heritage of Israel since the days of Moses, and Habakkuk was familiar with it. He found it difficult to square this revelation of the unbending justice of God with the situation which prevailed in his own day. It was for this reason that he turned to the Lord and said, **“O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear!”**

As we observe the conditions which prevail in this crisis hour of the world today, we wonder how much longer the Almighty can suspend judgment.

Many godless people sneer at the concept of a moral governance of the universe when even their own feeble sense of justice is not satisfied. The greatest statesmen of the world admit that there is no way out of the darkness that has engulfed the nations because of human corruption. Great powers tremble in confusion, and within the halls of the United Nations they grapple at each other's throats. Nobody knows the solution. Christians, like Habakkuk of old, raise the plaintive cry, “Why doesn't the Lord come? Why doesn't the Holy One intervene in the affairs of a world that is racing onward to ever greater depths of moral degradation?”

Notice the reply which the Lord makes to the bewildered prophet:

“Behold ye among the heathen, and regard, and wonder marvellously: for I will work a work in your days, which ye will not believe, though it be told you. For lo, I raise up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, which shall march through the breadth of the land, to possess the dwelling-places that are not theirs. They are terrible and dreadful: Their judgment and their dignity shall proceed of themselves” (Habakkuk 1:5-7).

God declares that his silence does not mean that he is ignorant of world conditions, nor that he has forgotten his ancient warnings.

God says:

“Habakkuk, I am about to do something which you'll hardly believe when you see it — something which will take place so swiftly that you'll scarcely understand it. I'll tell you what I'm about to do. I'm about to take the most godless nation on the face of the earth, the Chaldean nation, and use it as my instrument of judgment upon your nation.”

The Lord proceeds to describe the blitzkrieg methods of the Chaldean, or Babylonian forces, as they scoff at the leaders of Judah, overrun every stronghold, and gather as the sand the captivity of the chosen but erring nation.

The Chaldean shall “. . . **change, and he shall pass over, and offend, imputing this his power unto his god**” (Habakkuk 1:11).

God will judge Judah, and his instrument of judgment will be the iron fist of a nation that recognizes no god except the god of might.

History repeats itself. What kind of nation was it that began to roll across the countries of Europe during the early days of the Second World War? Germany at that time officially recognized one god, and that was the god of might. The religious spokesmen for Germany at that time screamed, “Away with your Jewish Christ! Germany wants nothing of him!”

Germany preferred to worship in the spirit of Odin and Thor, the gods of the thunderbolt, the gods of battle and of war. The invincible German war machine began to roll across Europe, plundering country after country that was at least professedly Christian. While those countries certainly were not in a position to merit the favor of God, not one of them had officially gone to such an extreme in its apostasy as to recognize no god except the god of might.

At the same time in the Orient another nation began to engulf island after island in a fabulous display of might. Japan recognized only the sun-goddess, and Shintoism, its official state religion, which was so vile that extended portions of its scriptures were too obscene to be incorporated into an English translation for publication in America.

When the warlords of Japan launched their cruel campaigns against many countries that were at least open to Christianity, it became evident that here again was a nation whose god was its might.

God pledged to Habakkuk that he would use the most godless nation on the face of the earth as an instrument of judgment against Judah. But this disclosure presented yet another problem to the prophet. The answer to Habakkuk's problem was an adequate one, but that very answer raised a still more formidable problem. The prophet now found himself with a very disquieting moral problem on his hands, and he voiced it forthwith:

“Art thou not from everlasting, O Lord my God, mine Holy One? we shall not die. O Lord, thou hast ordained them for judgment; and, O mighty God, thou hast established them for correction. Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity: wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?” (Habakkuk 1:12-13).

Habakkuk knew that his own nation was ripe for chastening, but he was unable to fathom the Lord's disclosure that the wicked Babylonians would be the medium of judgment.

The prophet well knew the reputation of that godless nation, and he considered that the most righteous of its citizens were less righteous than the most wicked among the sons of Judah. He was befuddled at the very thought that God would use a more wicked nation to judge a less wicked nation. After all, if Judah was deserving of judgment, then how much more was the haughty host of Babylonia, the scourge of all the earth, worthy of the divine disfavor!

Habakkuk's dilemma was suggestive of the predicament of our time.

Who knows how many months may elapse before another war machine begins to roll? It will be the mightiest military machine in all the history of the race and it will belong to the most godless nation of all time. When the Russian bear begins to lumber across the land mass of Asia and Europe, taking more godly nations in his stride, a great many people who are uninformed as to God's program will be raising the question, "If there is a God, why doesn't he seize the wheel of the universe and do something about world conditions?"

Every Christian should be thrilled to know that some twenty-five hundred years ago God directed a prophet to write one entire book of the Old Testament for the express purpose of answering this very question.

The words of the problem-laden prophet in the opening verse of the second chapter are replete with wisdom for those who question God's dealings in our day:

"I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower, and will watch to see what he will say unto me, and what answer I shall answer when I am reproved" (Habakkuk 2:1).

Every Christian should learn from the beautiful example of this prophet, who was willing to await the salvation of the Lord.

All too frequently God's people are prone to render premature conclusions about his personal dealings with them. What is your reaction when your body is wracked with pain or when God permits you to be tested financially or in some other manner? How do you view the Lord's dealings when you see the wicked prospering at the very time you are passing through the vale of sorrow? Are you willing to mount the tower of watchfulness with unshaken faith and confidently await the disposition of the One that doeth all things well?

It wasn't very long until the Lord gave the prophet his final answer:

"And the Lord answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry" (Habakkuk 2:2-3).

Habakkuk is instructed to record and circulate the message that is about to be delivered. The divine instruction is found in Habakkuk 2:3, and it is to the effect that the disclosure of God's will about to be given is not primarily for the prophet and the people of his day, but rather for us in these crisis days of the twentieth century.

The vision is specifically for **“an appointed time”** and **“at the end it shall speak.”**

In other words, the message is intended for the end time, the days in which we are now living.

What is the content of the message that God gave us through Habakkuk? It has to do with the personal return of the Lord Jesus Christ. We know this because the writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament quotes this very passage from Habakkuk and interprets it as a reference to Christ's return:

“Cast not away therefore your confidence which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith . . .” (Hebrews 10:35-38).

The inspired writer of Hebrews personifies the **“it”** of Habakkuk 2:3 and applies it specifically to the Saviour who will return in glory.

Further, he calls attention to our need of patience, in view of the chaotic world conditions which will immediately precede that long-awaited event. God's message to us through Habakkuk is inescapably clear. We who live in the final hours of the age, when it would seem as if Christ is tarrying, or delaying his coming, should take hope, for the Redeemer will not tarry beyond the time set in the divine scheme of things; he will surely come.

But what of the immediate question which posed such a problem to the prophet? How can God use a more wicked nation to judge a less wicked nation? How could God employ the evil might of Babylonia against Judah?

The divine response to this query begins with God's appraisal of the Babylonians: **“Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him . . .”** (Habakkuk 2:4).

God assures the prophet that he is fully aware of the wickedness of the Babylonians. Then, in the remainder of the chapter, God straightway begins to pronounce woes upon them.

Five terrible woes ring down from the throne of heaven upon the Chaldeans:

- **“Woe to him that increaseth that which is not his . . .”** (Habakkuk 2:6);
- **“Woe to him that coveteth an evil covetousness to his house, that he may set his nest on high . . .”** (Habakkuk 2:9);
- **“Woe to him that buildeth a town with blood, and stablisheth a city by iniquity!”** (Habakkuk 2:12);
- **“Woe unto him that giveth his neighbor drink . . .”** (Habakkuk 2:15);
- **“Woe unto him that saith to the wood, awake; to the dumb stone, arise . . .”** (Habakkuk 2:19).

Thus the condemnation of a righteous God falls heavily upon the Chaldeans, who are successively charged with robbery, covetousness, murder, conquest, and crass idolatry.

It is as if the Almighty were saying to the prophet, “*Habakkuk, that which you fail to comprehend is that I employ a godless nation as an instrument of judgment and then, in turn, deal with that very nation.*”

We will recall that Hitler and Tojo, having trodden more righteous people than they, were in due course brought to their doom.

The same vindication of God's unbending justice will be manifested in the future when the King of the North undertakes his evil rampage. That godless nation which marches at his bidding will come to its doom in Palestine (Ezek. 38 and 39). God may use Russia as an instrument of judgment upon others, but as in the case of the Chaldeans, he will in due time intervene to assure that Russia too shall fall under the hand of justice. The program of the Sovereign One will run true to its course just as the needle runs true to the pole.

But perhaps the chief message of the prophecy of Habakkuk for the Believer today is to be found in the words, “. . . **the just shall live by his faith**” (Habakkuk 2:4).

In our day, as in Habakkuk's day, it seems as if all is going wrong. The forces of evil are gathering strength, and the forces of righteousness are rapidly disappearing. The fabric of human history is not yet complete, and its eventual design is not apparent to us as it is to the Master Weaver. There is always the danger that we shall prematurely conclude that the fabric contains no design at all. But the hand of the master is gradually rendering the design, step by step. We are not to live by the turbulent conditions which we daily witness upon the horizons of the world, but rather by our faith — faith that all is well in the divine perspective, and that the chaos of the hour will eventually fade from the scene only to unfold to our rapt gaze the unspeakable perfection of the fabric of God's design.

The heart of the prophet was deeply affected by the disclosure that God's justice would eventually be vindicated.

Moreover, Habakkuk gladly accepted the gracious exhortation to cease his preoccupation with the turbulent events of his time, and to live by the light of faith. As the wonders of the exalted ways of heaven's Sovereign burst upon his contemplation, his soul welled up in a song of praise which is recorded in the closing chapter of the book.

What a fitting climax to the struggles of the prophet! What a joyful conclusion to his anguish of mind!

Annie Louise Murphy's poetic paraphrase of the final portion of the book of Habakkuk strikes a responsive chord in the heart of every Christian who experiences faith's victory over the crisis of this present hour:

“Although the fig tree shall not blossom,
Neither fruit be in the vine,
We will trust in our Redeemer,

Who turns water into wine.

Though the labor of the olive fail,
And fields shall yield no meat,
Though the flock be cut off from the fold,
He still our needs will meet.

Though in the stall the herd be missing,
And famine stalk the land,
Yet, He who fed the fainting thousands,
Still opens wide His hand.

Though depression be a valiant foe,
Brought on by human sin,
God will make man's wrath to praise Him,
And every battle, win.

Though perilous times be with us now,
Not the confusion, see,
We're listening for the trumpet, LORD,
Our day of Jubilee.”

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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