

**Living Messages
of the
Books of The Bible**

GENESIS TO MALACHI

BY

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE MESSAGE OF HABAKKUK

A. THE PERMANENT VALUE

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

Crystallized In one clear Statement. 2:4.

I. The Declaration Itself

- i. The actual Text. (See Translations.)
- ii. The Contrast.
 - a. On the one Side.
 - 1. The Manifest. "Conceited."
 - 2. The Hidden. "The Crooked Soul."
 - b. On the other Side.
 - 1. The Manifest. Righteousness.
 - 2. The Hidden. Faith.
- iii. The Affirmation.
 - a. Positive. "**The Just shall live!**"
 - b. Negative. Of the Conceited, nothing is said.

I. Of Habakkuk's Experience

- i. The Problems recognized.
- ii. The Attitude adopted.
- iii. The Answer vouchsafed.

II. Of the Principle

- i. Recognize it.
- ii. Apply it.

Faith the Principle of Life in spite of all Appearances.
Pride destructive in spite of all Appearances.

II. The Illustrations

- i. Of the self consuming Nature of Life which is

III. The personal Word

- i. Application to personal Life.

Self-centered. 2:6-19.

a. Its Manifestations.

b. Its Retribution.

ii. Of the triumphant Experience of Life which is

God-centered. 2:20-3.

a. The Vision of GOD.

b. The Reward of Faith.

ii. Application to Service.

IV. The central Word "Wait"

THE method of this book is peculiar. While it constituted a message to the people of GOD, its method was not that of direct address. This is seen at once if we put it into contrast with that of Hosea. In the prophecy of Hosea we have the notes, or general outlines, of a public ministry extending over more than half a century; and in all there are the elements of public address, of messages delivered to men. These are absent from the book of Habakkuk. Like the book of Jonah, it tells the story of a personal experience.

- the book of Jonah gives the account of a man's failure to sympathize with GOD, and therefore of his failure to sympathize with Nineveh.

- the book of Habakkuk is the story of a believer's conflict of faith, and of the ultimate triumph of faith.

The very character of the book makes it easier than usual to discover its permanent value. That is crystallized in one definite statement which lies at its heart:-

"Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith."

This statement in itself suggests difficulty rather than declaration. Therefore, in order to understand it, we need the whole background of the prophet's experience. That background of experience may, for the purpose of this study, be stated by the repetition of a brief paragraph from my previous lecture on the content of the book:-

"In this book we have a man of faith asking questions and receiving answers. A comparison of 1:2 with 3:19 will give an indication of the true value of the book. Opening in mystery and questioning, it closes in certainty and affirmation. The contrast is startling. The first is almost a wail of despair, and the last is a shout of confidence. From the affirmation of faith's agnosticism we come to the affirmation of agnosticism's faith."

That is the story of Habakkuk.

At the beginning, a man who believes in GOD is heard declaring his agnosticism, "**How long shall I cry, and Thou wilt not hear? I cry out unto Thee of violence, and Thou wilt not save!**" That is faith's agnosticism, belief's problem. Every man of faith faces a similar problem sooner or later.

Faith is the underlying principle of the life, but it is bewildered by the circumstances, and it says so. In answer to its challenge it receives a declaration, and so is confirmed.

The story of Habakkuk is that of a movement from the experience of doubt and questioning, to

that of certainty and praise, and the doorway between the two is found in the statement already quoted.

- all the first part of the book leads to that door.
- all the latter part of the book proceeds from that door into ever widening experience.

Habakkuk does not end with a wail; he ends with a song. He does not end with enquiry; he ends with affirmation. He begins by saying, There is violence and cruelty, and GOD does nothing.

He ends by saying:-

**"Although the fig tree shall not blossom,
Neither shall fruit be in the vines;
The labour of the olive shall fail,
And the fields shall yield no meat;
The flock shall be cut off from the fold,
And there shall be no herd in the stalls:
Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will joy in the God of my salvation."**

I want to discover the secret of this change, and I do so in the central statement, which reveals the contrasted principles or motives of false and true life.

Let us first examine the declaration itself. We recognize at once that there have been difficulties in translating this particular verse. We are familiar with the reading of the Authorized Version. Let us take four other translations in order that we may recognize the difficulty, and yet see that while there is difficulty, there is agreement also in certain fundamental matters, which are the matters of supreme importance.

Pusey translates thus:-

"Lo, swollen is it, not upright is his soul in him. The righteous by his faith he shall live."

Henderson translates thus:-

"Behold the proud! His soul is not right within him; but the righteous shall live by his faith."

George Adam Smith translates thus:-

"Lo, swollen! Not level is his soul within him; but the righteous shall live by his faithfulness."

Joseph Bryant Rotherham translates thus:-

"Lo! as for the conceited one, crooked is his soul within him; but one who is righteous by his faithfulness shall live."

The difficulty of expressing the thought of one language in another is very great, it being almost

impossible to carry over the light and shade of suggestion.

The differences are those of the words *swollen, proud, conceited one*.

Yet as we think of the peculiar quality and value of these different words, we also discover the identity of suggestion. Again there is the difference between the expressions "*By faith*" and "*By faithfulness*." The use of the word faithfulness suggests rather the result of the operation of faith on the character and conduct of the man of faith. The word faithfulness means, quite literally, *fullness of faith*. It may be affirmed that faithfulness means *fidelity*. And so it does; but what is fidelity other than fullness of faith? Fidelity is a word which expresses the outward result of the inward grace, which is fullness of faith.

The Hebrew word carries both thoughts.

- the inward grace, the master principle, is fullness of faith; and
- the outward manifestation, the obedient practice, is fidelity.

It is patent, therefore, that these two words, or concepts, are in perfect agreement in the way in which they put two attitudes of life into contrast. An examination of the different terminology by which the one attitude of life is described, reveals the same attitude in each case. So also if with equal carefulness we examine the words which describe the other attitude, we discover that the attitude is always the same.

Let us now observe the contrast. On the one side we have certain manifest things, and a hidden secret. On the other side we have also certain manifest things, and a hidden secret.

As to the first. The words conceited, swollen, or proud indicate the external manifestation. What, then, is the hidden secret? That of the soul not upright, not right, not level, crooked. The outward manifestation is conceit; the hidden secret is crookedness of soul.

As to the second. Here also is the outward manifestation of righteousness, and the hidden secret of fullness of faith. One need not dwell here a single moment, for the statement is perfectly simple. Goodness is always simple. It is evil which is complex. It is much more difficult to discover the devil than GOD, to define evil than goodness. It is always more difficult to deal with a crooked thing than with a straight thing.

Suffer me a parable. Supposing I had in my possession, but out of your sight, two sticks. If I said to you, I have a straight stick and a crooked stick, which can you imagine best? Your answer would inevitably be, the straight one, for a straight stick is a straight stick; but a crooked stick may be crooked in a hundred different ways. All of which is but to remind us of the complexity of evil and the simplicity of goodness.

So far we have not considered the declaration itself. We have been dealing with terms only, the instruments through which the light is to flash. What, then, is the central affirmation? "**the just shall live by his faith.**" I am convinced that we have been in danger of putting too much emphasis upon the thoughts suggested by the words "**just**" and "**faith.**" Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that we have put too little emphasis upon the positive and flaming

affirmation, "**shall live.**" In this connection notice the remarkable contrast of silence. Of the conceited soul nothing is said. He is puffed up, his soul is crooked within him. What does he do? Nothing.

Does he not live? No.

Now carefully observe the application of all this to the problem of Habakkuk.

He looked around, and saw everything crooked, unlike GOD, proud; the wicked flourishing like a green bay tree; violence rampant!

What was GOD doing? The righteous were oppressed, broken; hardly any of them were left; they were dying out.

Poor pessimistic soul! What does the text say? "**his soul . . . is not upright in him.**" Anything else? Nothing about the apparently flourishing wicked, but something about the fainting righteous. "**the just shall live.**"

The result of that declaration for Habakkuk was that his agnosticism merged into song.

Faith is the principle of life in spite of all appearances. Pride is destructive in spite of all appearances. These godless men and affairs seem to be so high and so proud; these enterprises, which are in rebellion against eternity, seem so mighty, and encased in armour so strong that we cannot overcome them. Look again. "**The just**" - poor, despised, in difficulty, hardly daring to lift his head - "**shall live.**"

The principle of faith is the principle of life. Anything that is not of faith is crooked and swollen; leave it alone. It will pass and perish.

What is GOD doing? He is presiding over His own law, watching it work out to its ultimate conclusion, holding everything in His grasp; and, in spite of the appearance of the moment, surely, if as men count time, slowly, crushing all that which is crooked in its soul and swollen in its pride, and lifting into life all the things which are of faith.

Then the prophet turns to affirmation! The illustrations that follow flash their light back upon this central declaration.

He first describes the swollen and the proud, their pride and their passing, the manifestations of the self-centered life, and the retribution that inevitably follows such life. All the things of pride and self-seeking pass before the vision - ambition, covetousness, violence, insolence, idolatry - and the prophet shows that everyone involves its own nemesis and judgment. Those who have been crushed under the rule of the swollen, revolt; and he is spoiled. When the swollen would come into possession of the cities he has coveted; the very walls talk, the very beams thunder out judgment. There is no possession granted to greed. Violence issues in self-destruction. Insolence made men drunk, and laughed at them when they were drunk; in turn the proud himself is made drunk, and becomes the shame of all who gaze upon him.

The keen satire of Habakkuk is poured upon idolatry, as he declares of idols there is no breath in them; to pray to them is to be unanswered; to be in agony is to find no helper. The self-centered life - ambitious, covetous, idolatrous - seems to rise higher and still higher; but the prophet has heard the secret, and he knows that pride-destroying forces are already working the destruction of the proud.

Then he illustrates the life of faith.

- there is first the vision of GOD coming from Teman.
- then he traces, as I think, the whole history of the Hebrew people through the great file - leaders of faith - Abraham, Moses, Joshua.
- at last he trembles as he watches GOD's judgment.

He who had thought GOD was doing nothing to punish evil, now prays that in the midst of wrath He will remember mercy.

He who had imagined that GOD had forsaken the faithful, and left them to their fate, at last breaks out into the great Psalm with which the book ends.

The living message is perfectly patent.

Faith has still its problems. The outlook is often dark and desolating enough. The message of this book is first that we cannot and ought not to judge by the appearances of the hour, but by the word of GOD, which is at once His oath and covenant.

When we have to confront these problems, let us take up Habakkuk's attitude. Habakkuk might have started out as a lecturer on the inconsistencies of the doctrine of the supposed government of GOD.

Instead of that he told GOD of his perplexity.

He poured out his heart in the presence of GOD.

He said, I cry Violence! and You do nothing. Oh, the comfort of the fact that we may say anything to GOD. There is a hymn we sometimes sing, and I wonder if we really mean it: "I tell Him all my doubts and griefs and fears." The trouble is that we talk of our doubts to our neighbours instead of telling them to Him. The best place to speak of the secret problem is the Secret Place. Let us take time to listen to GOD that He may explain Himself to us.

Some one says GOD does not speak to men to-day as He did of old. I will give you a truer statement: Men do not listen to-day as they listened of old.

If men will listen, GOD will speak.

Let us believe the truth of this central principle, and apply it. Let us who name His name, and profess to be men of faith, put the measurements of this verse upon all the problems that confront us in this world. To do so would be to find ease from a great deal of pain, to be saved from a vast amount of suffering. We should not so often be degrading Christianity by discussing in the

newspaper columns our own inability and weakness. There are vested interests - high, proud, swollen things - lifting themselves against GOD; but they do not live. The life element is to be found in the man who has faith in GOD. There is life in none other.

Is there not a personal word of application here?

Has this book anything to say to me? **"Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but the just shall live by his faith."**

In the compass of my own life, that life which none can know but GOD and myself in its inner and deepest things, how does that verse appeal? Does it rebuke me for crookedness of soul, or vindicate me for the trust that means triumph?

Did I say that my own life none can know save GOD and myself? That is true, yet it is always manifest sooner or later in the external things. If I am crooked in soul, men will find it out by my conceit. Every secret sin sooner or later flames through the windows of the soul, burns upon the cheek, blasts the external. That matter is too solemn to illustrate in public; it is for consideration in the inner chamber, and when the door is shut.

What is the final word of this message for us?

"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."

Does that seem an easy thing to do? I ask the question, and would give you time to think.

Have you never discovered that waiting is the hardest of all work? **"Wait."**

It is a great word. How shall I wait? On the watch-tower, telling GOD everything, and listening to GOD.

When Habakkuk looked at his circumstances he was perplexed. When he waited for GOD and listened to GOD, he sang.

~ end of chapter 34 ~
