

WRESTLING HABAKKUK

Notes of an address at Great Malvern by
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(Hab. 1:1-3, 11-13; 2:1-4, 20; 3:1-2, 17-19)

The prophet Habakkuk is unique among the minor prophets in various respects. I suppose that of all the twelve minor prophets we know least about Habakkuk, except, maybe, Malachi. Where he was born, what he did, and when he died, are matters of conjecture. Habakkuk is a name, too, rather hard to pronounce, and its meaning is ambiguous. Some say it means “embrace,” but if this is so it is not the embrace of a lover, but of a wrestler. So some have said that Habakkuk means a “wrestler.” Well, he was a wrestler, and a very great wrestler. We hear a good deal about wrestling Jacob, but not much about wrestling Habakkuk, yet Habakkuk wrestled with God as surely as did Jacob. But Habakkuk found, like Jacob, and like every one else who has set up his will in opposition to the will of God, that God must have His way. Abraham wrestled about Ishmael, that Ishmael might live before Him; Moses wrestled to get into the land; David wrestled that the child born in adultery might be spared; Peter wrestled, “Pity thyself, Lord, this shall not be unto thee”; and even

Paul wrestled concerning his thorn in the flesh; but all these found in the end that God's will must be supreme.

Habakkuk lived prior to the Babylonish captivity, which he predicted, but he did not like the thought of what was coming. He begins unburdening himself (chap. 1:2) in a very fretful spirit, "O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear?" A fretful spirit is never a spirit in touch with God. Whatever our circumstances it is no use fretting about them, it will not mend matters, and we know from experience what moral damage it does us. Habakkuk did not like what God told him was coming, so he dares to interrupt God. (Note the dash, New Trans., chap. 1:11.) He knew that Jerusalem was very wicked. His lament was concerning their wickedness, but he could not understand Jehovah bringing a yet wickeder nation against his people to destroy them. He says, "Thou holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he." Speaking most reverently, Habakkuk had to learn that God had a perfect right to be silent when He thought fit. And Habakkuk found out that it was good for him to hold his tongue; for when he got on the watch-tower and was silent, then he was able to say, "The Lord answered me." Habakkuk prayed *too much*! There are no "selahs" in his first prayer; in his second prayer there are three pauses, so prayer was thus changed to praise. What does *selah* mean?

“Selah bids the music rest,
Pause in silence, soft and blest:
Selah bids uplift the strain,
Hearts and voices soar again,
Selah ends the vocal praise,
Still to God your voices raise.”

The meaning of selah is really compressed into one word, and that word is “silence.” G.V.Wigram once said, “No Hebrew word has been more tortured in order to extort from it its meaning than ‘selah.’” But selah has never told us, because selah cannot speak. Selah means “silence.” It is a great thing to punctuate our prayers with a few selahs. It is quite possible even to pray too much. A man of God once said, “If I had my time over again, I would read less and pray more.” We know that he had occasion to say that, but is not the converse sometimes true? We may pray too much and read too little. When I pray, I speak to God, but when I read my Bible it is God speaking to me. I remember years ago in Australia, there was a brother in great trouble, and another brother went to see him. The troubled brother said to the visiting brother, “I have been praying about this matter for a month—no answer has come. Will you get down on your knees with me and pray with me?”

“No,” said the visiting brother.

“No! why?”

Said he, "I see very distinctly that you have been praying too much. So much that the Lord has not been able to get a word in. Suppose we open our Bibles and listen to what He has to say." They got the answer very quickly.

I went to see a brother in London some time ago, who was tortured with that terrible complaint called rheumatoid arthritis. He had just come down after a sleepless night. Said he, "I could not sleep for pain. But I opened my Bible (J N Darby's translation) when I came down just now and looked to God to speak to me; and there it was in the Book of Lamentations, 'It is good that one should both wait, and that in silence, for the salvation of Jehovah.'"

It is a great thing, when under pressure, to let God speak to us, and for us to be silent. It is a relief to cease fretting, and to lapse into silence, and hear the still small voice of Jesus whispering in our souls and telling us just what we need to know. Now, the prophet gets on the watch-tower, and the answer comes. He says, "The Lord answered me." But the Lord says more, "Write the vision." Yes, "Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables," said Jehovah, almost sternly. Habakkuk did not want to write the vision, because he had only seen the cloudy side of it.

The vision must be written, beloved. We must write it upon tables, in the energy and the grace of

the Spirit of God. It is not written “upon tables of stone,” but, as the apostle puts it, “upon fleshly tables of the heart”—hearts that have been made susceptible to divine impressions. When we come under the influence of the new covenant this is what takes place. The objective brings about the subjective. “We all, looking on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, are transformed according to the same image from glory to glory.” That means from the glory of the old covenant to the glory of the new covenant. The apostle says, “Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ.” The church is a blurred and blotted epistle, but it is the only delineation of Christ that the world has down here. Doubtless the precious Bible delineates Christ, but the world will not see Him in it. But the world can read you and me. How important that we should be legible. I may be only a line, I may only be a letter, in that wonderful epistle, but let me be legible. May a little bit of Christ come out in us day by day, that the world may know something of the moral glory of Jesus.

“The vision is yet for an appointed time ... though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry.” Paul says, “We see Jesus”—that is the vision. “We see Jesus ... crowned with glory and honour.” We see Him by *faith* crowned yonder, but as to *fact* the vision is still in abeyance, it has not yet been fulfilled. So the apostle says, “We see not yet all things put under him, but we

see Jesus ... crowned with glory and honour.” How blessed to gaze upon the vision and have it written upon the fleshly tables of our hearts. Then, and only then, is it *made plain* and unmistakable in our *lives*, “That he may run that readeth it,” says the prophet. You can put it the other way about if you like. It is a reciprocal proposition: “So that he who reads may run.” The thought, however, is that what is read is legible. How blessed to gaze into the mirror of the new covenant and to see the glory of the Lord. How many are going to heaven who are gazing into the wrong mirror. The mirror of the new covenant can do what no other mirror can do—it can transform us! We are changed into the same image from glory to glory as we gaze into that mirror. James says of the forgetful hearer that he is like a man who sees his natural face in the glass, and straightway forgets what sort of a man he is. Ah! he is looking into the wrong mirror—the old covenant. People who pray, “Lord, incline our hearts to keep this law,” are looking into the old mirror. James speaks of the new mirror when he adds, “Whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty ... shall be blessed.” The mirror of the new covenant transforms us. Snatch, if it be but a few moments, from your dinner hour in order to get alone with the Lord, that He may love you and you may love Him. Ah! what a change those few minutes make in you. You have been looking into the new mirror—seeing Jesus. So when you have been with Him thus there is a mellowness in your

eye, and a gentleness in your voice. Those around you know you have been with Jesus, and have learned of Him.

Now the vision is yet for an appointed time—we must wait for its accomplishment. Meanwhile the prophet pronounces some awful woes upon the wicked. Yet, “the Lord is in his holy temple,” and that gives us rest—He is over all. “Let all the earth keep silence before him.”

The prophet now gets the vision bursting upon him in all its radiant majesty and power. He prays, but soon he praises. I think prayer always precedes praise, even in our Lord’s day morning meetings, where there is first of all what one might call the optative note struck—the note of *desire*. The prophet starts in various tones or strains. Collectively our worship may start upon Shigionoth; but it should end on “stringed instruments.”

The song of Habakkuk begins upon Shigionoth, which means variable strains. In that translation which we value so much, JND says that Shiggaion, the singular of the Hebrew noun, means an “elegy.” (Ps.7 note) What is an “elegy”? A lament. But hope and joy mingle in the song. Sometimes, at the start of the Lord’s day meeting morning, things do not seem to go on at all harmoniously—there are variable strains. What is the remedy? “The chief singer.” (Ch.3:19) As soon as

Habakkuk reaches the “Chief Singer”, or the “Chief Musician”, his song is on what he calls “my stringed instruments.” We must hear the voice of the Chief Singer when we come together to partake of the Lord’s supper, and we do when we eat of it. It is in the dispensing of the emblems that He comes to us. He comes to us and takes His place in our midst, and leads the singing. He hymns the praises of His Father and our Father, of His God and our God. He can only come to us in His own way, through His death as set forth in the loaf and cup, of which we partake. So the partaking of the emblems should not be put off. We used to say that we must wait until we are up to it before the bread and the cup are passed round. But we have learned that it is the supper that adjusts and moves our affections as nothing else does.

Have you been in a Lord’s day morning meeting when things have seemed dull and flat? A brother has dispensed the emblems: at once the meeting has moved on to a higher spiritual plane. There should, of course, be no undue haste—we are to “tarry one for another” when needful. But we come together to eat the Lord’s supper—that is our objective (1 Cor.11:33). “This do in remembrance of me,” and surely we ought to be responsive. The trouble is that some of us think that as soon as the emblems are dispensed we should turn at once to the Father. That is a mistake. The Lord showed unto them His hands and His side. I said to

R Dunn once in New Zealand, “Is that the supper?” He replied, “I do not think it is the supper. I think it is the desire of the heart of Christ to maintain in our souls the love set forth in the supper.” A beautiful answer. When the bread and the wine have been passed round, there is no need to hurry away from the supper. He wants us to linger over it, only we linger over it from His side, and not from our side as we did prior to the emblems being dispensed. Then in His own time and way He leads us to the Father. He leads us to the other side of death, we touch the assembly and sonship, and all that appertains thereto. He does not want us to hurry away from the supper. I think it is most blessed for us all to start together when we come to partake of the Lord’s supper. Habakkuk begins his song on a very low note. “Revive thy work ... remember mercy.” I think we should begin in accord with the actual condition of the meeting. Sometimes that hymn, “Where glory lights the courts on high,” is given out, or some such hymn. Ah! we have to come down, and we do. The Lord will not allow the lambs of His flock to be ignored like that. How sweet and cheering that we can all start together at the supper—the fathers, the young men and the little children—all know something of the love set forth in the supper. Then as the meeting goes on some may not be able to advance as others do. But we can all start together. What a precious hymn that is with which to start the Lord’s day morning meeting:

“We’ll sing of the Shepherd that died,
That died for the sake of the flock;
His love to the utmost was tried,
But firmly endured as a rock.”

You see the young and the weak can join in, and so we can all start together. Then the emblems are dispensed, and we move in the good and gain of the supper. We should get beyond the sacrificial system when the emblems are dispensed, yet at the same time we do not lose what we have got there. The bread and the cup are intensely sacrificial, and as we move on we carry the good of all that with us. We never lose anything. We carry the good of the brazen altar, the good of the laver, the good of the golden altar, the gain and tranquil peace of the holiest with us when we pass out of the mediatorial system into the family circle. There the Chief Singer is the One who leads us, and how blessed it is when He comes to us (John 14:18) and we hear His voice. (Heb.2:12)

I heard of a great singer who one night was passing down a London street and took refuge from a storm of rain in a little mission room. He said afterwards that the first hymn was being sung as he entered, but the voices were mostly out of tune. How it grated upon him! But amidst all the lack of melody he said he detected a sweet and clear treble voice, perfectly in tune, and that voice gradually brought all the other voices into tune. So when the hymn was closed there was perfect harmony.

So, beloved, the Chief Singer brings all our voices into divine harmony with His own.

Now before the prophet sees the vision bursting forth before his ravished eyes in all its brightness, he hears the distant thunderings, he sees the lightnings flashing. He knows that there must be dark days before the brightness comes. “Evil men and seducers,” says the apostle, “shall wax worse and worse.” Things in Christendom will get worse and worse. Yet as long as we are here, whatever happens we can sing, “I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.”

We get now three symbolical trees mentioned by the prophet—the olive, the fig, and the vine. The labour of the olive may fail. The olive tree speaks of *promise*. Abraham was the root of the olive tree. This and that promise may seem to fail to us. Have you ever clung to a promise in the Bible, yet it has seemed to fail?

What about the fig tree? “Although the fig tree shall not blossom.” The fig tree takes us back to Sinai. The fig tree represents the Jew—the man under divine culture—“All that the Lord our God hath spoken that will we do,” said they at Sinai. The fig tree suggests *profession*. We may feel sometimes that there is nothing in our profession. Yes, ashamed we may be of it.

But what about the vine? “Neither shall fruit be in the vines,” says Habakkuk. The vine takes us back

to *the land*. “He brought a vine out of Egypt.” His purpose was to plant it in the land, and He did. If the olive speaks of *promise* and the fig of *profession*, the vine speaks of *purpose*. Beloved brethren, we may sometimes doubt amid all the chaos and ruin within and around whether the purpose of God is going to be fulfilled.

Perhaps you say I am drawing a dark picture. I am not drawing it—the prophet draws it. He goes on to say, “Though the fields shall yield no meat.” That for us means no blessing in the *gospel*—in the great harvest fields around us. “The flock shall be cut off from the fold.” From the flock of God, one and another taken away by death, or taken from us locally, so that we diminish in numbers. “There shall be no herd in the stalls.” We go into the stalls, alas! they may seem bare. There seems to be nothing there for God. This is a very dark picture, I admit, that the prophet draws, but he **FACES IT**. We must face things, we must not think that things are going to be easier in the future than they have been in the past. We may have to go through further and more painful exercises—*assembly exercises*! But what is our resource? “Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.” The apostle said to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.” If the Philippian jailer was alive then and heard that, he might have said, “That was the man I knew in jail when he and Silas prayed and sang

praises at midnight.” Did Paul refer to the jailer in that epistle when he said, “Thee also, true yokefellow”? We are not told his name.

The prophet goes on to say, “Jehovah, the Lord, is my strength, and he *maketh* my feet like hinds’ feet.” (New Trans.) The feet have to be made. There must be spiritual formation. Hinds’ feet are so constructed that they can walk on high places without any danger. “He maketh my feet like hinds’ feet.” Then, “He WILL make me walk upon my high places”—to walk as heavenly people should walk.

Then comes the dedication to the Chief Singer; some have said it should be the Chief Musician, but it is one and the same blessed Person—Christ is the Chief Singer. He comes to us thus that He might lead our praises, then He becomes the Chief Musician. “To the chief Musician. On my stringed instruments.” (New Trans.) Not *wind* instruments, they represent prayer. There is effort in prayer, but no effort in worship. There is no effort in drawing music out of the stringed instruments. The slightest touch, and the music sounds. Do you know anything about it? We all do! It may be for only a very few moments, as the emblems are partaken of at the Lord’s supper. Oh, those blessed pauses! All is silence! We feel the fingers of those nail-pierced hands operating upon the stringed instruments of assembly affections, and drawing out the sweetest melody.

But the stringed instruments have to be *tuned*! Sometimes a musician in stringing his instrument breaks a string; he has wrung it too high. Beloved brethren, the Chief Musician never snaps a string! The tuning means discipline. It is individual. It goes on in secret. But he never puts upon us more pressure than we can bear. Epaphroditus was apparently on his death-bed, but the Lord had mercy upon him, and upon *Paul*, as Paul says, "Lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow." The Lord saw that His servant might break down under the pressure, and so He took a little off. If we are passing through trial, if we are going through afflictions, the Chief Musician knows what He is about, He is stringing the instruments, but He will never break a string. He will not lay upon us more than we can bear. (1 Cor. 10:13) Some time ago I was looking at a diary I kept years ago, and on turning over the leaves I saw on a certain day a single entry, "*Pressure well nigh at breaking-point.*" It all came back to me, I remembered it all. At breaking-point; yes, but not a *string broken*. He knew how much His poor servant could bear. Dear tried and suffering one, the Chief Musician never breaks a string. The Lord must tune His stringed instruments, but He never snaps a string.

How blessed it is to become, through His discipline, stringed instruments. Then when we are in the assembly together our affections are all in tune, and we feel those blessed fingers as they

manipulate our renewed affections and draw out the sweetest melody for the ear of His Father and our Father, His God and our God!

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