

PENN FREE METHODIST CHURCH

Sermon delivered on 10th January 2021

Habakkuk 1:1-6

THE CALLING OF BELIEVERS IN A GOD-REJECTING WORLD TO TO BE WATCHERS, WEEPERS AND WORKERS

v1. “The burden which Habakkuk the prophet did see”. A burden is that which is heavy to bear. Such is Habakkuk’s message to the people. He has serious and weighty words of judgement to pronounce upon Judah, for wickedness is rife in the land. Whilst Habakkuk is the Lord’s prophet, any Christian who is not called to preach should nevertheless have a burden concerning the rebellion against God which he sees around him. This is a vital aspect of the believer’s service to Christ, to pray and to work that the world might see its sin and turn to God through the Gospel.

v2. “O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee *of* violence, and thou wilt not save!” Habakkuk is longing for God’s intervention. We must not think that he is complaining that God has been dilatory. No man of God would pray like that. He knows that God’s providence is perfect in

all its outworkings. Yet he is perplexed by the extended period in which the wicked appear to triumph; he has been praying long that the awful situation in the land might change, and so he cries plaintively to God, Wilt Thou not hear? He knows that God **does** hear all his prayers, yet he is troubled that the righteous continue to be oppressed and evil continues to go unchecked. He desires that the wicked, if they do not repent, might know God's righteous condemnation.

v3. "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". The prophet is writing between 608 and 605BC, during the reign of King Jehoiakim, whose reign was doing the nation much harm.

"Jehoiakim was twenty and five years old when he began to reign; and he reigned eleven years in Jerusalem ... And he did that which was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done" (2Kings 23:36-37). So Habakkuk has to deal with a situation of ongoing, God-less government. The corruption in the land starts at the top. For example, on an occasion when words written by the prophet Jeremiah were read out to him, Jehoiakim cut up the scroll, threw it in the fire and ordered Jeremiah's arrest, such was his hostility to the word of God, and this hostility ran deep throughout Judaeen society. People were being oppressed contrary to all justice, and there was no fear of God in the land.

v4. "Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth". The nation was involved in the worship of false gods, there was general corruption and law-

lessness within society, and there was no proper administration of justice. How all this grieves the heart of Habakkuk. Habakkuk's contemporary, Jeremiah, also had to prophesy against King Jehoiakim.

“Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbour's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work; That saith, I will build me a wide house and large chambers, and cutteth him out windows; and it is cieled with cedar, and painted with vermilion ... But thine eyes and thine heart are not but for thy covetousness, and for to shed innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence, to do it. Therefore thus saith the LORD concerning Jehoiakim ... He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem” (Jeremiah 22:13,14,17,19). So Jehoiakim used forced, unpaid labour to build a grand royal palace. He was an oppressive ruler, living out his life in defiance of God's law. Such defiance permeated the whole of Judaeon society. There would be awful consequences to all of this, for God is not mocked.

v5. “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”. God is bringing judgement upon Judah from “among the heathen”, namely from Babylon. This will happen in the lifetime of those to whom Habakkuk preaches, and it will be more horrible than they could ever imagine. The phrase “among the heathen” could also be translated simply as “transgressors” or “despisers”, and it appears in this form in Acts 13:41, where Paul quotes this verse 5.

“Beware therefore, lest that come upon you, which is spoken of in the prophets; Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish: for I work a work in your days, a work which ye shall in no wise believe, though a man declare it unto you” (Acts 13:40-41). Thus spoke Paul in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia. How Paul grieved over the rejection of Christ by his countrymen.

v6. “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*”. God is going to send the Chaldeans, or Babylonians, to destroy the nation, and take it into captivity. We thus see that, although the Lord is long-suffering with sinful men, they cannot presume upon his forbearance for ever. Judgement may well come down upon a wicked nation, or wicked individuals, even in this life, as well as on the great last day. The Christian, therefore, should not be afraid to speak out about the reality of God's judgement, and if society is characterised by particular sins, then the particular sins have to be named and confronted as well. Our own land today has not reached such levels of violent oppression as Habakkuk had to deal with, but the seeds of dangerous social collapse are already well and truly sown. God's commandments in modern Britain are frequently cast aside as the relics of a less enlightened era. Our society, for example, thinks that it can ignore the Sabbath day, or promote ungodly lifestyles, on the grounds that the times have moved on and people's understandings have progressed. Governments now legislate to promote the very wickedness which the Bible condemns.

Just as Habakkuk was greatly distressed by what he saw in Judah, so we as Christians should be distressed by what is happening in

our land. It is in fact one of the marks of God's true people that they are grieved at the rejection of God by those around them. No real Christian can rest content whilst their neighbours are rushing themselves into hell, and bringing the nation under God's judgement at the same time. To grieve at the world's wickedness in no way conflicts with our own personal joy and peace in believing. There are some who argue that to bemoan and denounce wickedness is all very negative, and will not endear unbelievers to our faith, but we see from the example of Habakkuk here that we cannot shirk this task as Christians.

It is worth remembering how John the Baptist prepared for the coming of our Lord by calling on sinners to repent and by warning them of imminent judgement. So to expose the world's sin and unbelief is in fact very positive. It provides a necessary preparation for the reception of the Gospel. Personally, the Holy Spirit sustains and exalts us, as we walk through this evil world, but it is also true that, before we get to heaven, we are called to fight a good fight, as well as to rejoice. It is only through much tribulation that we enter into God's kingdom. A Christian should never be an escapist, sitting in a quiet, comfortable corner and hoping that the nasty world will somehow go away, nor should he ever view his faith simply as a means to promote his own personal good feelings. As the hymn writer puts it, "Christian seek not yet repose, cast thy dreams of ease away; thou art in the midst of foes, watch and pray". So the believer is called to be a 'watcher'. To watch means to stay alert for prayer. The Christian must earnestly pray for the unbelieving world around him. He is called to weep over the plight of the lost. The supreme example of this principle is in the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, who grieved and wept over Jerusalem. He knew that He was soon going to glory; He knew

that nothing could separate Him from His Father's presence, but that still did not stop Him weeping. Before He got to heaven, He was engaged in grievous service here on earth. He first had to complete his Father's will, before He entered into his Father's glory. He had to watch, work and weep, before the glory came; and so must it be with us.

“(God) delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them (in Sodom and Gomorrah), in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds)” (2 Peter 2:7-8). Lot is another example of a man of God who wept. In the face of gross ungodliness, Lot did not say, Never mind; I am going to heaven. Even though he of course knew that God is still on the throne and in control of all things, we are still told that he vexed his soul daily, having a deep burden for the God-rejecting foolishness of his society. It is those who watch and weep who are also resolved to work for God, because they feel the desperate seriousness of the environment of unbelief all around them.

“My soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the LORD'S flock is carried away captive” (Jeremiah 13:17). Jeremiah was another man of God who vexed his soul and grieved. He is called the weeping prophet. He would have always had a deep personal joy, because of his own salvation, but that did not stop him weeping over his nation. He wept, because he knew judgement was coming. Far from being negative, this was actually a mark of the Holy Spirit dwelling within him, for the Spirit causes the believer to be disgusted at sin, and to have a burden for the lost. Jeremiah's weeping was an intrinsic part of his spirituality. It is as believers

weep over their country, that they then earnestly seek God's face, and work to rectify the situation. Jeremiah grieved, and also preached the judgement of God, and because of this he was not a popular preacher. If he was the pastor of a church today, he would not have a large congregation.

“Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law ... Mine eyes run down with rivers of water, because they keep not thy Law ... I beheld the treacherous dealers and was grieved because they keep not thy word” (Ps.119:53,136,158). The author of this psalm furnishes another instance of one who wept over the prevailing wickedness and unbelief of his society. From his words we again learn how the Christian should be grieved at Godlessness, pouring out his heart to God in prayer. We today should have a burden for our Christ-rejecting nation.

“I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart ... for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:2-3). Paul was distressed that so many of his fellow Jews were without Christ. His priority was not the pursuit of personal elation. It was to fight the good fight of faith, and to confront a wicked world.

“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry” (Acts 17:16). How distressed was Paul in seeing the Athenian temples devoted to false worship.

“The LORD said unto him (i.e. to Christ), Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof” (Ezekiel 9:4). Here we learn that the Lord Jesus Christ especially marks out as His own

people those who weep and grieve at sin and unbelief. Like Habakkuk, we should have a burden for our nation – announcing its inevitable judgement, unless there is repentance from sin and faith in Christ. Yes, we possess personal joy at our own salvation, but before we get to heaven, we are called to minister to a lost world, which is under God’s wrath. We should be sighing and crying at the defiance of God around us. We should be angry at false teaching within many churches, depriving men of a knowledge of the Gospel, and which is even prepared to condone outright sin. It is not Christian charity to remain calm and placid, when God’s word is being compromised.

v6. “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*”. God is addressing the nation in response to Habakkuk’s prayers. He is about to work in such a way that none will believe it possible. He is going to cast off Judah and destroy the Temple. In judgement for their sin He will bring against Judah a fierce invader, namely the Chaldeans. The people have spurned God’s mercy, and so He will now be glorified in their judgement.

Conclusion

As with Judah in Habakkuk’s day, most people in our contemporary society to remain recklessly indifferent to the fact of coming judgement. Our task is to grieve over them, and to confront the sin and unbelief all around us. We must be **watchers**, earnestly praying that God will work in power; we must be **weepers**, grieving over wickedness and the plight of the lost, and we must be **workers**, doing all that we can to preach the Gospel and bring sinners to the Lord Jesus Christ.