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Sermon preached by Mr. J. Delves at "Ebenezer", Clapham on Sunday morning 10.8.52

Hymns 60, 225, 628

Reading Habakkuk 1 and 2 Text Habakkuk 2. 3 and 4

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

It will be observed that the Word of the Lord was often spoken to His servants by visions and had relation to future events; and indeed sometimes the Word of God to the people through His servants was a very painful word, a word indicating severe judgements for their sins, and at other times a word promising great mercy upon their repentance, and often re-affirmed by an assurance that the word spoken or the vision given would most certainly be fulfilled. This has ever been the case with God in His ways with His people, whether it refers to ancient Israel in their past and present history, or His spiritual seed, or any particular person whom that word may concern. It is a mercy if grace is given to fall before the word of God when that word reproves us and to confess our need of that reproof, and of that particular chastening that may be involved, and when we have grace to receive the exhortation, to receive the promise, feel the strength and blessedness of it, and can wait upon the Lord for its certain fulfilment.

I have many times felt this to be a remarkable word, and in this case a word revealing ultimate mercy in the Lord's dealing with His people after a season, an appointed time, of chastening and judgement. When the Lord spoke to His servant the prophet He said concerning this vision that He gave him, that at the end "it shall speak, and not lie", that is to say he would not be disappointed of it; he would see the vision fulfilled in the Lord's time and more-over he would not be disappointed in the fulfilment which is rather a remarkable point. We may see the fulfilment of a certain matter and yet perhaps in some particulars feel a

disappointment; but the Lord assures His servant that he would not be disappointed; that is to say, when God did appear, that appearance would answer to all his highest expectations. "It will surely come, it will not tarry". Although it says that it may tarry, the meaning is that it will not tarry beyond the appointed time set by God for the fulfilment thereof. There are many things that may, from our point of view, linger long, may seem to tarry, may be delayed in our judgement, or be long of fulfilment; but to a point nothing is ever delayed by God; that is to say it is not delayed beyond the time that He has set, beyond the appointed time. This has been rather confirming to me of late. There is so much in just this, "The vision is yet for an appointed time". That appointed time may be known only to God; it is not often, if ever, that He discovers how long that appointed time is unto His people, otherwise there would not be the same need for them to live by faith. The prophet here is directed to reprove ungracious impatience with relation to the Lord's time of doing things. Here it may be noticed that there is a great difference between importunate earnest prayer in waiting upon God in our matters, and an ungracious, unbelieving impatience which can savour, in some instances, of much pride and rebellion. There is a very great difference between these two things, and it is just here that the Lord's people are to live by faith. It is true the way may be dark, the difficulties great, the burdens heavy and the temptations strong; but still it is in and amidst all these particular things that the people of God are to live by faith. When it is said, "The just shall live by his faith", it does not infer that God's people can live upon something they produce in themselves. It is a living upon that which the Lord gives. It is the exercise of faith upon His word, His promise, His faithfulness to His word concerning them, however opposite to that fulfilment prevailing conditions may appear to be. It is a wonderful thing when a child of God can live by his faith in this way because it is a life that enables him to look above all seeming impossibilities to an all-sufficient God, and

to believe that all is beneath Him and that the everlasting arms are beneath His people to hold fast, to find an anchor for their faith in every storm that secures them and enables them to lean entirely upon Him. It is very wonderful to live by faith and this was the word to Habakkuk and this is the word to us, "The just shall live by his faith" - not upon what he may conclude or think of this or that but upon faith exercised unwaveringly upon divine immutability, divine wisdom, strength and grace notwithstanding all the fears one may have about himself and his own case. This is to hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering, for He is faithful who hath promised.

Now what I want to say here by way of a little introduction is that the prophet Habakkuk had a heavy burden pressing upon him, a burden which more or less all the Lord's servants have, the burden of the Word of the Lord. What was the burden that weighed so heavily upon the prophet Habakkuk? One point in it was the Lord's silence to him. In some instances it would be difficult to find a heavier burden than that. It had a great effect upon the prophet's mind, "O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear?" Sometimes the Lord would hear His people immediately and give an immediate answer but we have no right to take what the Lord may do to one and claim that He should do the same with us. If He should be pleased to speak or answer one quickly and should dispose to keep another a long time waiting He has in that matter a purpose to be revealed in the appointed time. Here the prophet says, "How long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save?" This appears to show that the prophet's mind was greatly distressed by reason of prevailing conditions and that notwithstanding all his cries the Lord apparently allowed things to continue and did not answer immediately. So it can be with the people of God and may have been with some of you. All these pressing burdens, these difficult things, these hard things, these bitter things, or certain conditions in your life, press and weigh

heavily upon your spirit, and cause you to cry and groan before the Lord. Yet no answer comes. A silent God can be such a trial of faith to a believer as to bring him in his own feelings almost to the borders of the pit and may give the great adversary of souls such a hold upon him as to drive him almost to despair. Yet, notwithstanding all this, he finds it is for an appointed time and it may be well to remember that God has just as strong a hold on us when we feel to be on the borders of hell as when we are on the borders of heaven. O but this silence can be exceedingly painful; it was to David. "Be not silent unto me lest if Thou be silent unto me I become like them that go down into the pit".

Another point here was the painful discovery that the prophet Habakkuk had in this chapter; the prophet is shown that the country would be invaded and ravaged by the cruel enemy who would bring it to utter ruin. The great power of this enemy that should thus be an instrument in the hand of God to their chastening is described in very striking language and this brings the prophet Habakkuk to a very solemn point in his soul's feelings. He did not swerve from his confidence in the holy character of God but he could not reconcile such a procedure with His justice. "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." This was the point with him, the point that so heavily burdened his mind. "Wherefore lookest thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?" How mysterious to reason are some of the Lord's ways! We read in the Psalms that the Lord will cause or allow men to ride over our heads, that He will bring us into a wealthy place. Great judgments were to come upon this people for their slackness and disregard of judgment or of any of the ways and laws of God; they were to be chastened for their iniquity; but there was a vision that was set for an appointed time. Under the weight of these things the prophet Habakkuk resolves to watch and wait to hear what the Lord would say to him and how he would answer.

"I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower", he does not say, Well, I suppose God will fulfil His purposes in His own way and I shall leave it there. He does not drop into a careless indifference about these things. No, he goes to the watch-tower. Have you ever been there? Or are you in such a place now? It is a good place to be in. There will always be something to watch, but the prophet had a particular matter to watch and to wait upon the Lord for. You may have a particular matter. It is true sometimes there may not be anything very pressing, though actually there will always be matters to watch because to us the Lord has not revealed future things or their timing, but Habakkuk had a particular matter to take him to the watch-tower where he would wait upon God to hear what He would say to him.

This is a wonderful place to be in. The prophet was before God with heavy matters pressing upon him, and some of you know something of this experience. Job was here when he said "O that I knew where I might find Him! that I might come even to His seat! I would order my cause before Him and fill my mouth with arguments." We may remember that while it is quite consistent and acceptable to complain to God we should never complain of Him. Many of His people have had to be upon the watch-tower with very heavy burdens, things at times well nigh overwhelming them of which they may have been able to speak to none but their God and lay their complaint before Him; but it is pride and presumption in us to complain of Him or to find fault with Him although we may be guilty of so doing in our hearts at times; but here the prophet has a matter for the Lord to handle. Do we know anything of this? Have you got a matter that may be too difficult, too intricate for you to handle and that has set you upon your watch-tower, laying it before the Lord for Him to handle? Are you taking it to One who can always handle matters wisely and handle them wisely for you? "I will set me upon my watch and will watch to see what He will say unto me, and what I shall answer when I am reproved," (or argued with); as though people would come to him and complain of certain things, complain of God's ways. Habakkuk would have a word from God to answer them with.

So sometimes it may be even with some of you. You may find it difficult to answer the world, and not only the world, but how to answer the Lord's people in certain things and even more difficult to know how to answer an unbelieving heart that rises up against the Lord's ways with you. What shall I answer them? It is a great thing to get something from God upon the watch-tower that can bring gracious confidence into your soul that all will be ordered well. The Lord was not silent here to His servant; He did answer him; He met with him in this case. The Lord answered him and said, "Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it". The vision here evidently refers to the Lord's appearing eventually on behalf of His people to the utter and complete destruction of those that oppress them, but there was to be a lapse of time before the vision should speak. It was a promise that deliverance would come but there would be heavy judgments before that deliverance should be effected. It was to be for an appointed time, hence the prophet was commanded to write it. So we find this in the Scriptures; the Lord commanded Isaiah to take the roll and write in it with a man's pen, that is to say to write in such a way as to be clear to all who should read it. It was to be distinct and visible to all. So also the Apostle John was commanded, "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter", for "these things are faithful and true." Evidently the prophet was to write in order that it should be preserved in its accuracy, as only writing can be. Anything passed by word of mouth may be altered or misunderstood, but this was to be in clear distinct writing so that all could see it, and here particularly because it would be some time before it would be fulfilled. There it would be before them to remind them continually of the certainty of its fulfilment. It was to be written too because of the importance of the vision; things of little importance do not need to be written but matters of great importance are written in order to be preserved perfectly correct. "Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it", that he who reads it may run with the message and deliver it to others,

or that he who may be hard pressed for time may not have to delay in order to examine it; he may read it clearly and quickly, for the vision is yet for an appointed time.

The vision here indicates deliverance in the Lord's time. It was a vision of mercy to the prophet, a vision where the Lord revealed His purpose and will concerning His people. He would not leave them utterly desolate, would not leave them to be entirely destroyed. He would destroy their enemies but He would preserve them as a people in their bondage and captivity and would deliver them at the appointed time. This is a very confirming word, "The vision is yet for an appointed time". It can come into many things and into some things that deeply concern us. God has an appointed time for everything; there is no uncertainty with Him in relation to the fulfilling of His will. We read that there is an appointed time to man upon earth. God has set His days, some more, some less. Some may be taken in early life, some in middle life, others live to old age, but there is an appointed time and we cannot tell what that appointed time is. We cannot tell the number of our days or the nature of our decease, but we know that there is an appointed time. This is where the need is to live by faith during those days that the Lord has allotted us until the appointed time shall be. This applies to all that the Lord has promised - He sets an appointed time. How truly it was so in relation to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in His incarnation. "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman"; There were many long weary years of waiting for that vision, for that promise to be fulfilled, and it must have seemed as though it would never be fulfilled; but in the fulness of time the Saviour appeared upon earth and the vision did speak. Though in men's judgment it may have tarried, yet in the appointed time it did speak and it did not tarry beyond the Lord's time. Nothing will ever tarry beyond the Lord's time. He never is before His time and never is behind. He has an appointed time; moreover there can be moments when faith can look very sweetly upon this and when the rest of faith in this appointed time is as opposite to a carnal indifference as heaven is from hell. It is sweet when faith can receive the Lord's appointed

time and believe that must be the best time.

The vision is yet for an appointed time. There is an appointed time for every trial and affliction in our lives, it is a time which the Lord has set and, with all our efforts to try to hurry out of this or that trouble or affliction or burden, we may find ourselves getting into a greater burden or a greater difficulty. It is sweet when faith can resolve itself into the Lord's hands concerning His appointed time, whatever the trial may be or whatever the burden. Nor does this militate against importunate prayer which will be mingled with a holy submission to the Lord's purpose and will. It is for an appointed time, it will surely come, it will not tarry; the deliverance the Lord's appearing is just as sure and certain as is the present trial or uncertainty. There is an appointed time to the Lord's silence in relation to certain things, but it is a mercy to be upon the watch-tower, not upon the bed of sloth, saying, Well the Lord has an appointed time, but to be upon the watch-tower watching to hear what the Lord will SPEAK. We come into certain anxieties in things in our lives and yet that anxiety does not actually affect the issue. It is an earnest waiting upon God. The purpose of God may be to bring about deliverance by answers to prayer at His appointed time. "At the end it shall speak, and not lie, though it tarry, wait for it". O this waiting. This waiting is where the trial of faith is, where the burden presses, where the enemy assails with all kinds of suggestions. Still, "though it tarry, wait for it". This is faith and in certain instances in this life faith is not in a hurry; that is to say it has not become ungraciously impatient but abides upon and anchors in His faithfulness and power to perform His promise. "He that believeth shall not make haste", that is to say he shall abide firmly upon the Rock, shall take his stand there, shall not run this way or that way like a person having no shelter or refuge. "The just shall live by his faith" in and through this appointed time, and learn some useful lessons too; "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". "It will surely come", not, It may possibly come, but, It will surely come, as God said to Moses when He appeared to him at the burning bush, "CERTAINLY" or surely, "I will be with thee". It will surely come, O is there an earnest, anxious waiting upon God for something, about something? He will bring it to pass. "It will surely come, it will not tarry". Here is something for faith to lean upon, to trust in. We must be careful not to trust anything less than divine immutability and divine sufficiency. May the Lord help us and give us to see the mercy and blessedness of this and to be upon our watch-tower waiting upon Him for the appointed time for the vision to be fulfilled. Amen.