

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of HABAKKUK

The date of Habakkuk's prophecy is somewhat uncertain, but it may be taken as having been written towards the end of Josiah's reign, which makes him a contemporary of Jeremiah. One has only to read a few verses of his prophecy to realise that he is a different kind of prophet from the others we have been studying, in that he is not so much speaking to men for God, as speaking to God for men. He is preoccupied not primarily with the sins of men, but with the problems of life, and in particular, with the age-old question, why does evil flourish? In this respect, his prophecy is timeless, and we are therefore less concerned with problems of date and historical association than in any of the other prophecies. Habakkuk's name is said to mean "clinging to God" and this is an apt description of the theme of the book. He is asking, "Why does God allow...?", and in the midst of the questionings that are agonising to a sensitive spirit such as his, he clings to God, refusing (like Jacob) to let Him go until He answers him. The book is therefore of great significance and importance as a contribution to the discussion of the problem of evil, and of particular value to all who have had to face baffling situations that seem incapable of moral construction and therefore bring deep perplexity and clouding upon the human spirit.

1) 1:1-4

The opening verses of the prophecy reveal the concern and perplexity of the prophet. Scholars are divided as to whether the "spoiling and violence" (3) refer to internal disorder in Judah which the Lord is about to punish, or to oppression of the righteous, that is, Israel as a whole (4), by an enemy from without. We may not be able to assert with any certainty which is the true interpretation; but in either case, the Chaldeans (6) are raised up as God's instrument of chastisement. This question of interpretation however becomes of secondary importance compared with the spiritual issues raised by these verses. For here is the agonising problem of unanswered prayer (2). The prophet has been burdened by the oppression and injustice all around him and has cried to the Lord concerning it, but no answer has come. And this to him is almost a greater distress than the evils he has been praying about. There are two points worthy of consideration here. The first is that an urgent and distressful attitude of supplication can so easily turn into querulous complaint against the Lord for not doing our bidding. The fact that we may consider a situation to have come to a point of crisis and extremity does not necessarily present a *prime facie* case for swift intervention by the Lord. He may have other ideas, and it will not do for us to become exasperated with Him for not doing what we think He ought to do, still less harbour a secret grudge and resentment against Him. The second point is that of God's permissions of evil for His own all-wise purposes. One of the central affirmations of the Christian Faith is that evil does not have the initiative in human life, however much at times it may seem so, and that God allows it to rage for purposes of His own long after we think it should be curbed. We are too shortsighted and distrustful of His sovereign omnipotence to realise this; if we did, we would wait for Him far more patiently than we often do.

2) 1:5-6

Here is the Divine reply to the complaint of the prophet. There would seem to be both assurance and reproof in it. On the one hand, it assures the anxious prophet that God has not forgotten to be gracious; on the other, however, it is as if the Lord were almost chiding Habakkuk for his inability to see the hand of God at work. 'Look around you, Habakkuk. Can you not see that in the emergence of the Chaldeans as a power to be reckoned with in the world I am at work, fulfilling my sovereign purposes against the very evil that is giving you such concern. You are complaining, "Why does God not do something?", but I am doing something, if only you had eyes to see. 'Faber's words (C.H.520) are very applicable here: "Workmen of God! O lose not heart, But learn what God is like... thrice blest is he to whom is given The instinct that can tell That God is on the field when He is most invisible". Illustrations of this are not wanting in the Scriptures themselves. One recalls similar cries from the children of Israel in their cruel bondage in Egypt. For long, they must have thought that the heavens were as brass and that God was doing nothing to help them. Yet even as they thus cried, God had already done the decisive thing. A baby had been born into a Levite family, who was destined to become their leader and deliverer in the fulness of the time. And in the midst of their sorrowing convictions that God had forsaken them, Moses was being secretly prepared and fashioned for his strategic task. How faithless we are! God is never inactive, and when He works hiddenly, we ought to be prepared to trust Him. Apply this then to the seemingly unanswered prayers for spiritual renewal in the land. Has God forgotten to be gracious, or is it simply that His workings are hidden, but nonetheless far-reaching and significant? He is the hearer of prayer. Let us be content to trust Him in the darkness.

3) 1:7-11

The description of the marauding Chaldeans is fearsome and terrifying, but we need not doubt that it is a literal picture; all that we know of the arrogant might of ancient empires confirms it as authentic. In the main, the meaning is clear, although one or two verses require explication. The A.V. rendering of 7 does not bring out the force of Habakkuk's statement. G.A. Smith renders it, "From themselves start their purpose and rising", but even this does not convey with sufficient clarity the point of the words, which is that they are a law unto themselves, acknowledging no power but their own, whereas in fact any power that they had was by Divine permission and indeed Divine appointment. This, in fact, is the real significance of the passage, for in 11 (where the A.V. also needs re-interpretation) the contrast between mere human power and Divine sovereignty is underlined. The "change" referred to in 11a has been variously rendered. G.A. Smith renders it "then the wind shifts", with an alternative, "their spirit changes". Rotherham suggests, "Then hath he become arrogant in spirit", which is more helpful and illuminating. "He shall pass over" (A.V.) may be taken to refer to crossing the line or bounds set by God; this is corroborated by Rotherham's translation, which reads, "He hath committed excess". The last phrase of 11 could mean either that the Chaldean has made a god of his might, or that his violence is due to his god (i.e. to the evil spirit that drives him on). The gist, then, is as follows: The Chaldean is raised up, unknown to himself, as an instrument of the Lord's anger against the evil of God's people, and fulfils the Divine will in sweeping down upon them. But, falsely attributing his power to himself, he exceeds the bounds of the Divine permission and brings himself under condemnation (For a similar idea, see Isaiah 10:5-19).

4) 1:12-17

The fact that God should raise up the Chaldeans as the rod of His anger creates other problems, however, for Habakkuk. For the Chaldeans are an evil and godless power, worse than those whom they are raised up to punish and chastise. How can God suffer them, and how can He use them as an instrument of His purposes, without sharing responsibility for the evil? This, briefly, is the prophet's dilemma in these verses. The meaning of 12 seems to revert to the earlier question of the raising up of the Chaldeans to punish Israel, and the prophet accepts this fact recognising that if this be so, it must be corrective punishment and for their ultimate good. God's people may suffer, but they will not finally be destroyed (this is the force of "We shall not die"), whereas the Chaldeans are by contrast ordained for judgment. This the prophet sees and accepts (not a little thing, either, to see, when one thinks of the almost insuperable difficulties this raises for so many people, who refuse to believe that 'a God of love' could ever act in such a way), but it does not explain the even greater problem of how God can possibly make use of such an evil nation as the Chaldeans without compromising His character as the God Who is of purer eyes than to behold evil (13). In the latter part of 13, however, he reverts to the earlier question of God allowing the arrogance of the Chaldeans in their oppression of God's people to continue so long unchecked (He sweeps people into His net (15) like fishermen at sea, brings home the catch, and goes out to bring others to a like fate, as if there were no God Who was concerned with the injustices done to the hapless victims). It is a measure of the spiritual and emotional strain that lay upon the prophet that the two issues should become so intertwined, not to say confused, in his mind.

5) 1:12-17

We may pause suitably at this point to remind ourselves how relevant Habakkuk's problem is for us today. The setting of our questions and problems may be different, but their essence is just the same as Habakkuk's. The question asked so frequently, for example, during the last war, "Why does God allow war?" with its numerous variants, takes on a very different complexion when we study it in the light of the prophet's insights here, as does the even more modern mystification concerning the continuance, for nearly two decades, of the cold war and the absence of any lasting or settled peace in the world. Our modern climate of thought rejects out of hand the suggestion that God brings judgment upon the nations for their sins, refusing such a "barbarous" interpretation of events and saying, "God would never do such a thing", and what is more, assuring itself concerning the future that "God will never allow such a thing to happen to us". But God did allow such things to happen to His ancient people; the Chaldeans did sweep them into captivity; they were humbled and stripped of their nationhood. They learned, the hard way, that God means what He says by the mouth of His prophets. Men say, concerning the threat of Communism, "It could never happen in Britain". But do you suppose that this was not also said, and with equal confidence, in China, or in some East European states? It happened there. What is so different about Britain? If God did not spare His specially chosen people when their sins invited His chastising rod, by what token can we assume that we are an exception to the rule? The signs are not wanting that a moment of truth may come for our nation as shattering and devastating as any that confronted Israel of old.

6) 1:12-17

There is another line of application from which we may learn useful and necessary lessons here. It is in relation to the problem of unanswered prayer in the work of the Church and the gospel. So much prayer has been made for revival, yet revival does not come; and so many crying evils exist in the life of Church and nation yet God allows them to continue, and seemingly acquiesces in them. Why should this be so? We should recognise from Habakkuk's experience that when our sin allows evil an entrance into the life of the Church we may not dictate to God when He shall remove it, but rather submit to the discipline of pain and distress that its continuance brings in the permission and providence of God. We must be careful to distinguish between the desire to see such evils removed simply because they happen to cause us irritation and distress and the desire to see them removed because they are an offence to God. The two things are not the same. And if we reply, "Oh, but it is surely because they are an offence to God that we wish them removed", we must then face the fact that God appears to be more prepared to suffer these things than we are. This is an astonishing fact to which sufficient justice is seldom done, and is of wide application. It calls in question, for example, the well-meaning but misguided zeal for swift and immediate attack upon the things that happen to offend one's spiritual susceptibilities without any consideration that the long-suffering patience of God might perhaps indicate a wiser and more mature approach to the situation. If God is prepared to put up with a great deal that ought not to be in our denomination - modernism, infidelity to the truth, worldliness and the like - and still bless and prosper the preaching of His Word in the midst of it, then the plain truth is that these things are not for the time being constituting a barrier to His blessing (this does not, naturally, excuse these things) and we must resist the temptation to rush in where angels fear to tread, and resist also the temptation to confuse faithfulness with mere hot headedness. This is not an easy lesson to learn, but it needs to be, if the long-term purposes of God for His work are not to be seriously jeopardised.

7) 2:1

This verse is both the pivot of the prophecy and its central message for us. Habakkuk - and we must follow his example - took his problem to God, committed it to Him, and sought to see it from the Divine perspective. This is the meaning of the watch-tower metaphor. It is the ancient practice of ascending a high place in order to secure an extensive view that is referred to; the watchman can see from his vantage point the approach of the enemy or of a messenger bringing news from the front; or the army commander can obtain a bird's eye view of the deployment of his forces. The important point, however, is that in viewing any situation from a vantage point perspective is gained. And this cannot be got when one is in too close proximity to it. This is as true in the spiritual life as anywhere else. It is essential to stand back from spiritual problems, and become detached from them, in order to see them as God sees them. Near at hand, and inextricably involved in them, one tends to have a distorted view of them. There are variations in translation of the verse which give somewhat different shades of meaning to what the prophet says, without altering the general tenor or the words. The last phrase may be taken as "what I shall answer when I am reproved" (A.V.) that is, reproved by God for my complaint; or, more likely, "What God shall answer to my plea". Scholars think this is the more probable rendering, and that God is in fact characterised here as standing at the bar of human justice - a daring interpretation, and one which some would hesitate to accept. But there is little doubt that what is important here is not what the prophet will say, but what God has to say about the problems that have arisen in the prophet's mind.

8) 2:2-3

And now the answer of God to the perplexity of the prophet. Habakkuk is told to write the message clearly and plainly on tablets so that it may be swiftly read by any passer-by. This seems to be the best way to take the phrase "that he may run that readeth it" in the sense that the message must be sufficiently clear and distinct to arrest the eye and attention of those who see it. It is not certain whether 3 or 4 constitutes the message of the Lord to the prophet. If it is 3, then the vision must refer to what God is to do with the Chaldeans in the future, as if to say, "The Chaldeans whom I am going to raise up to punish Israel will themselves in turn be completely routed and destroyed". If it is 4, this would presuppose the fact of the Chaldeans' destruction, but explain that it would be in God's time, not the prophet's, that it would be accomplished. It may be that we should combine both thoughts, for both emerge clearly from the message of Habakkuk as a whole. The words of 3 are full of assurance for perplexed and discouraged believers. God has His appointed time for working, that is, He is never "caught out" by events, as if they should have taken place outwith His control or knowledge or permission. He works according to the plan and counsel of His own will, which sees the end from the beginning and is able best to decide when to make bare His holy arm to vindicate the right and accomplish His will. Since this is so, we mere mortals must not be impatient in face of His seeming inactivity. He will not act before the time, but just as surely He will not be late.

9) 2:3-4

Ellicot renders 3 thus: "The vision is to have the appointed day, and it pants for the end, and it shall not disappoint" - i.e. it pants for the day of completion, which shall do it justice. It longs to fulfil its destiny. The second reference to tarrying as it stands in the A.V. seems to contradict the earlier one, but it has the meaning "it shall not be behindhand". All this needs to be set over against the many references in Scripture to human and creaturely impatience for the fulfilment of the Divine purposes. Paul speaks of the "earnest expectation of the creation" in Romans 8:19 (translated in the RSV as waiting 'with eager longing'); in Revelation, the martyred saints under the altar cry out "How long, O Lord?"; while in 2 Peter 3 we are reminded that "the Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness". God is just as eager as we are, and longs just as deeply, for the final consummation of His will; but His impatience is under control, and He means that ours shall be too. This is one of the things the Scriptures are 'for' - so to show His amazing patience and longsuffering in relation to the perfect timing of His working in history that we may be encouraged to "wait on the Lord" and be of good courage. Let us learn this lesson from Habakkuk's experience.

10) 2:4

The first part of this verse refers to the Chaldeans. Ellicot renders, "Behold his soul within him is puffed up, it is not upright". The implications of this statement are interesting and significant. It means that there is something essentially unnatural and abnormal in the arrogance of the human spirit. 'Swollen' or 'inflated' is how G.A. Smith renders 'lifted up', and this suggests a diseased and morbid condition. It would seem therefore that what is being indicated is that evil has the seeds of destruction within itself, and that it is only a matter of time until the inevitable disintegration becomes manifest. It is in contrast with this that the second part of the verse has its significance - faith (or faithfulness) is the true principle of life. This we shall turn to in the next note; meantime, we should ponder the hopefulness of this principle that is revealed concerning evil's self-destructive potential. There is a sense in which this illuminates what was said in the previous note about the patience of God, for He gives evil its head in order to bring out the self-destroying properties in it and thus hasten its final end. So that paradoxically, although He sometimes seems to be doing nothing and therefore delaying His retribution upon evil, He is in fact actually, by doing nothing, fulfilling His will in causing evil to destroy itself. Ah, if we saw more clearly God's easy sovereignty in the human situation, we would be more disposed to wait with patience for His appointed time!

11) 2:4

There seems little doubt that 'faith' here is better translated 'faithfulness'. The apostle Paul certainly quotes Habakkuk's word in relation to justification: the context here requires the wider meaning of faithfulness. The word in the original, according to G.A. Smith, comes from a verb meaning 'to be firm' and is used in the Old Testament in the physical sense of steadfastness. It is thus used in the story of Moses' intercession for Israel during the battle with Amelek: "His hands were steady until the going down of the sun" (Exo 17:12). It is also used of the faithful discharge of public office (2 Chron 19: 9), and of fidelity between husband and wife (Hos 2:20), of faithful testimony (Prov 14:5), and honest dealing (Prov 12:22). It is the temper which faith produces in the believer, endurance, steadfastness, integrity. The meaning therefore is: "Let the righteous, however baffled his faith be by experience, hold on, loyal to God and duty, and he shall live". It is certainly true that to hold fast to God in time of darkness and perplexity serves to add a quality to human experience that nothing else will. This is expressed in the words of Faber's hymn already quoted, "Thrice blest is he to whom is given the instinct that can tell, That God is on the field when He is most invisible". That whole hymn, indeed, worthily interprets Habakkuk's message for us, and conveys a sense of the "life that is life indeed" which it promises. For, to have this 'instinct' for knowing and trusting God in the darkness is to be in an invincible position. It is to be "in all these things more than conquerors".

12) 2:4

We cannot pass from this verse without some consideration of the use made of it in the New Testament. It is quoted on three occasions, once in Romans, once in Galatians, and once in Hebrews. It is interesting to see the differing emphases in the three quotations. In Romans 1:17, it is clearly the 'just' that is Paul's concern. Indeed, Nygren, in his commentary on the passage, renders the verse thus: "He who through faith is righteous shall live". Just as clearly, the emphasis in Galatians 3:11 is on faith, as opposed to the works of the law. In Hebrews 10:38 what is in view is the quality of life that springs from faith. Thus, the first two uses of the quotation have reference to justification, while the third, in Hebrews, is sanctificationary in aspect, underlining Habakkuk's undoubted meaning of faithfulness and steadfastness. This does not of course indicate that Paul's use of the words in Romans and Galatians distorts the prophet's meaning; rather, the apostle goes to the heart of the words, and shows that justification is the basis and foundation of sanctification. It is significant, in this connection, that in both Romans and Galatians, Paul goes on to emphasise the reality and inevitability of sanctification flowing from justification. Romans 12-15 are the logical outcome of a true experience of justifying mercy, while Gal 5:22, 23 being the fruit of the Spirit, are also at the same time the fruit of a living faith. As the Reformers put it, justification is by faith alone, but justifying faith is never alone but ever accompanied by good works.

13) 2:2-4

It will be useful to sum up the lessons of Habakkuk's vision at this point before going further. The prophet is enabled to stand back, as it were, and view his perplexing situation in perspective, and this brings clearer vision and understanding. In a tapestry or a painting, the near view often does not make sense, and only from a distance is the pattern seen with any real effect. In viewing the Divine plan from a distance, he learns - and we may learn with him - that God often gives evil its head in order to bring it out into the open and destroy it. Habakkuk's plaint "Why does He not do something?" is simply one aspect of what could be a general question asked concerning the Old Testament as a whole. Why did God not send the Redeemer in Genesis, when man fell into sin at the first? The answer can be given only in such terms as that it needed the fulness of the time to convince mankind of the sinfulness of sin, and of the fact that God's Redeemer was its only hope. This indeed took time! Habakkuk was assured of God's ultimate triumph over evil. He will judge. But we must remember the over-all strategy. We are in the position of humble soldiers in the army, who do not have access to the blue-print for victory held by the general staff. What is required of us as soldiers is faithfulness and steadfastness to duty, even when we do not understand what is going on. We must learn patience, remembering that the mills of God grind slowly, though they grind exceeding small.

14) 2:5-8

The remainder of the chapter consists of a number of woes pronounced upon the oppressor. The insights given in them are very considerable. For one thing, it has been pointed out by commentators that throughout their compass the Lord is not mentioned as being involved in them, that is to say, He is not spoken of as intervening directly in judgment. G.A. Smith says that the woes "dwell upon the inherent tendency to decay of all injustice. Tyranny, they assert, and history has confirmed them - tyranny is suicide". This is one of the great lessons Habakkuk learned on the watch tower. To learn it is to have come to an attitude of patient waiting and longsuffering in the dark and perplexing paths of life. The inherent, self-destroying power at work within evil is seen perhaps most clearly of all in these verses which describe the intolerable restlessness and craving of the proud, arrogant spirits of whom the prophet speaks, The phrase "neither keepeth at home" (5) is eloquent of the endless drive in restless spirits that brings such agonies of frustration and is so destructive of personality. "Cannot be satisfied", also in 5, reminds us that it is of the essence of a wrong desire that nothing in all the universe can ever give it fulfilment. It is a voracious, debilitating, and finally destructive appetite; the more it consumes, the more it craves, until at last it consumes itself. This, then, is the final end of sin. As James puts it, "Sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death".

15) 2:9-11

Habakkuk continues his woes on the oppressor. 9 is better translated "Woe to him who accumulates wicked gain for his house, who sets his nest on high to save himself from the hand of evil". What the prophet means is that it is vain for the Chaldeans to think to make themselves impregnable by means of their ill-gotten gains and the plunder they have wrested from their hapless victims. Not only does the moral structure of the universe forbid this to be, but also there is that in their wickedness which will inevitably come back upon themselves. By cutting off many people (10) they are making it certain that they themselves will be cut off. The metaphor in 11 is very graphic; the house of their prosperity has been built by means of widespread oppression and rapine, and the very stones shall charge them with their guilt and the timbers shall add their accusation. Thus the very grandeur and magnificence in which they hope to rest secure will prove to be their indictment at the bar of Divine justice. Ah, how true it is that what we build, either literally or spiritually, may become our arraignment!

16) 2:12-14

The next woe echoes the same kind of sentiment as the earlier, with but a change of metaphor. In 11 it was the stones crying out against the oppressor, here it is the blood of the hapless victims of tyranny crying out to God. One recalls what is said in Genesis 4:10 about the voice of Abel's blood crying out from the ground to God. This is a word of warning to all who rise to prosperity at the expense of others, and is of wide application to the injustices of our own society. God does not hold men guiltless who exploit their fellows and make themselves rich at their expense. For an understanding of 13 compare Jeremiah 51:58, where a similar thought is expressed. G.A. Smith renders "...that the nations shall toil for smoke, and the peoples wear out for nought". Whether the 'nations' and 'peoples' refer to the Chaldeans and all like them, or to the hapless captives who are forced into slave labour for the building of their captors' cities, the meaning is that all their labour will be in vain and come to naught, because God has decreed that it should be so. This principle of frustration to the schemes of men is set in the light of God's ultimate purposes in the world (14) and is explained by the latter. It is because He is working to a different plan that anything that cuts across it has to be brought to naught. Why of course! Why should we expect anything else? What do we take Him for?

17) 2:15-17

Once more the 'boomerang' effect of sin is in evidence. As the oppressors have done, so shall it be done to them. The reference to drunkenness has been taken literally by some commentators, and metaphorically by others. In the literal interpretation, the references may be to the wanton outrage committed by the debauched Babylonian soldiery in their hour of triumph, reducing their hapless victims to shame and leading them into foul and unnatural lust. If the words are taken metaphorically, the meaning would be that the proud victors had made their victims drink the cup of their cruel anger till they had reached the depths of shameful degradation. They in turn would be made to drink of the cup of the fierceness of the wrath of Almighty God (Rev 16:19), and then foul shame, as of a man stupified with drink, would take the place of glory and dignity (so Ellicot). In 17 "the violence of Lebanon" means "the violence done to Lebanon". What Habakkuk means is that it will rebound on Babylon; it is the same thought as has been reiterated throughout the section. All that the oppressors do to God's people will be avenged on them in due time. Ah, Habakkuk, this is the God you thought was doing nothing and was indifferent to oppression and the cries of the righteous! How needlessly did you vex your heart, and how needlessly do we vex ours. O to learn a patient waiting on Him!

18) 2:18-20

The reference here to idol worship is as applicable to Judah as it is to the Chaldeans. Perhaps the contrast that is presented between the dumb, inarticulate, man-made gods of the heathen, and the living, watchful Lord of men and nations, and the woe that is promised to such vain worship, are meant to be a rebuke to God's people who were indulging in the basest idolatry to their hurt and certain punishment. It was in fact principally the sin of idolatry that had moved the Lord to raise up the Babylonian power against His people, and in this respect the woe pronounced in 19 must be understood as a word to them as well as to their oppressors. We should not miss the irony in the description of the idols. The prophets do not mince matters in the utter scorn they pour upon the false gods the people worshipped (cf Isa 46:5-7, Ps 115:4-8, Ps 135:15-18). Sometimes the most effective, and indeed the only, way of turning men from sin is to show them how utterly ludicrous (and unmanly) it is, and thereby shame them out of it. The occasional television broadcasts on freemasonry (not an inept reference while on the subject of idolatry!) must surely have had this effect on countless numbers of people who see it, as they realise what a ludicrous mumbo-jumbo the so-called 'secret' ritual consists of!

19) 2:20

We pause for another day at these solemn and impressive words. In their context they stand in contrast, as we have seen, to the dumb idols of the heathen, and remind us of His watchful eye upon the nations of men. But they stand in their own right, apart from any context, as a word of wide and varied application, for assurance and encouragement, challenge and warning. What encouragement, for example, to remember this when we enter His house for worship and to know that He is a living God. But the fact that it is a living God with Whom we have to do lays certain obligations upon us, one being that we are to be silent before Him. This needs to be understood on more than one level. It is sadly true that the amount of noise and chatter that prefaces a service of worship is sometimes so great as effectively to hinder a real spirit of worship and put an incalculable drag upon the man on whom the responsibility of leading the worship rests. This ought not to be, and need not be, and could happily be avoided by people taking thought about the matter. But it is also true that there is sometimes so much inward clamour in our hearts, and withal a continuing debate in our minds, that we scarcely give ourselves a chance to hear what the Lord will say to us. We are too busy speaking to Him, arguing with Him, telling Him what He should be doing, ever to be quiet enough to hear His still small voice. How much we miss by not preparing ourselves to wait upon God!

20) 3:1-2

Habakkuk's response to what was revealed to him in the watch-tower is the remarkable prayer which occupies the whole of the third chapter. The word "Shigionoth" refers either to the metrical structure or the musical setting of the Psalm. Two interpretations have been given of 2. One is that "speech" refers to what the Lord has just said, and that the prophet is awed by all that has been revealed to him. The other is that he is rehearsing to himself what God has done in the past, rather in the terms in which Psalm 44:1 does, "We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us...." In other words, it is a plea to God to do now what He was known to have done in the past great moments of Israel's history. The word "wrath" is better rendered "turmoil". It is not God's anger that the prophet is appealing against, but the turmoil and confusion of his time, in which his world was being convulsed. The cry "Revive Thy work, O Lord", is one which rises instinctively to our lips in time of declension and apostacy, but we do well to recognise that revival is within God's sovereign will to bestow or withhold. We may not assume as a matter of course that it will be given in answer to our prayers. As a matter of fact, Habakkuk's prayer was not granted; not revival but judgment was appointed for this people. The signs are not wanting that by the end of the chapter Habakkuk was seeing the matter in a different light, and this is one particular value it has for us today. Revival as a convenient way out of our present impasse, and revival as the fulfilment of the strategy of God are not synonymous.

21) 3:3-4

There now follows a remarkable recounting of Divine activity. This 'theophany' (as it is called) draws deeply upon the past history of God's people. There are parallels to it elsewhere in the Scriptures; one is reminded of the notable passage in Psalm 18:6ff, where the Psalmist exults in the manifestation of Divine power under the symbols of convulsions of nature. It is the riotousness of the natural phenomena that impress us with a sense of the Divine power. Some think that God is pictured here as coming like a storm rolling up from the south (Teman and Paran), others that the reference is to the manifestations of the glory of God on Sinai. But whichever is the right interpretation, the message of God's mighty, irresistible power comes through to us clearly. The phrase in 4, "there was the hiding of His power" is deeply significant, recalling a similar idea expressed in Job 26:14, "Lo, these are parts (edges) of His ways". What is meant is that such a manifestation of God's glory and majesty as can prostrate men in fear and awe, making them fall to the ground as dead (cf Daniel 10: 8, Rev 1:17), is merely a 'token' demonstration of a power which, if shown in its fulness, would reduce the world to ashes. God can only demonstrate His power in veiled fashion; we could not stand anything more. This is why, when He came in mercy and grace in the fulness of the time, He came - as a Babe - and was crucified in weakness!

22) 3:4

There is another interpretation of the "hiding of His power", well expressed in the words of the Rev. William Still: "We may ask, what do the words mean in this context? Succeeding verses go on to speak of His judgments. In what sense are His judgments related to the hiding (or unveiling) of His power? It may be that these words belong more to what succeeds than what precedes, suggesting that although God's glory swept through the land of Edom when Israel came from Egypt to Canaan, it was not His brightness Israel's enemies saw, but His darkness. There was both cloud and fire, darkness and light; the cloud had a silver lining, but everyone did not see it. And it is in the self-same deed that both the glory of God's grace and the terror of His judgment is seen. Thus the cross of Jesus is both doom to the evil and salvation to the children of God". That is food enough for thought for one day.

23) 3:5-6

Pestilence, plague and earthquake are the accompaniments of the Lord as He moves in judgment. The involvement of nature in moral judgment is characteristic of the scriptural revelation and is not confined to passages with apocalyptic flavour. Creation is one, and as Genesis 3 teaches us inanimate nature shares the effects of the fall of man, creation's crown. Thus judgment and mercy alike for mankind draw nature into association with man and the acts of God,. The phrase in 6, "His ways are everlasting" is elsewhere rendered "His goings are as of old" or "These be His ways from of old". In relation to the context, this can be given two meanings, the first that His actions now at this time are like His actions in olden time when He brought Israel up out of Egypt, the mountains are convulsed as Sinai was then. The phrase may however be given a broader and more general meaning, not referring to any particular incident in the past, but indicating that God is acting now entirely in character with what is revealed of Him throughout the Scriptures. He has always acted in a certain way because of the kind of God He is. He is unchangeably righteous, evermore the same, and for that reason predictably so. It is as if Habakkuk were saying to himself "I might have known how He would act, knowing from the Scripture what He has revealed Himself to be". And this is the relevant word for us today. God never acts in a way that is at variance with His revealed character.

24) 3:7-10

The graphic descriptions of God's past interventions continue, and again in these verses it is the dramatic passage of Israel from Egypt to Canaan that is in view, with particular reference to the crossing of the Red Sea (8, 10). Some of the language is hard to understand, e.g. 9, which has been variously rendered as "Thy bow shall be bared, even with the chastisements sworn by Thy word" or "Thy bow is stripped bare, Thou gluttest Thy shafts" but the general meaning is fairly clear, namely, that the arrows of the Almighty are flying abroad. Two further points should be noted. One is that the movement of nature involved in God's deliverance affords an excellent illustration of the vast movement of eternity for our sakes which constitutes the gospel of redemption, and of the 'disruption', so to speak, of the Godhead which was involved in His coming down, being made flesh, and being made sin, for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (see also Ps 18:16, 7). The other point is that the chariots that are wrath for the enemy are chariots of salvation for God's people. This is seen clearly in the illustration Habakkuk uses from the story of Exodus. It was the judgment upon Egypt that set Israel free, just as it was their salvation that proved a savour of death to Pharaoh and his armies. This is but a reflection of the Cross itself, in which judgment on sin in the person of the sin-bearer led to salvation for mankind. Salvation is something which is wrested from the jaws of the enemy, and not otherwise than by visitation can it be accomplished.

25) 3:11-13

The reference to the sun and moon in 11 is surely to the story in Joshua 10:12, 13. The idea expressed is that the heavenly bodies were shamed by the brightness and glory of the Almighty's arrows and spear into motionlessness. The purposefulness expressed in 12 reminds us of the extent of the victory God gave His people in clearing the Promised Land of the nations that were appointed for judgment. Commentators say that some of the tenses in these verses should be future, not past, but the fact is that what Habakkuk is saying refers both to the past and to the future. This is the prophet's point. As he remembers the past manifestations of Divine power (and his remembrance is surely inspired by the Spirit of God) he finds assurance "in the midst of the years" that God is still the same, and will deliver His people in like manner from all their distresses. We must see the significance of this theophany in relation to the theme of the first two chapters. There, God said to the prophet that He would act in His own, proper, time; here the promise is reinforced by the Spirit-inspired recollection of the way in which He has so acted in the past in vindication of His people. What an encouragement to trust Him! See Numb 23:19, "Hath He said, and shall He not do it? or hath He spoken and shall He not make it good?"

26) 3:14-16

The theophany sweeps on to its climax in these verses, with increasing dramatic intensity. The A.V. rendering of 14 is difficult; "villages" should read "princes". What the prophet means is that the Lord intervened with awful swiftness to strike through the heads of the enemy leaders with his shafts at the moment when they were about to devastate His people. If the thought in 15 - surely another reference to the passage of the Red Sea - belongs to that of 14, then the message becomes clear: it is that at the very moment when all seems lost (how the Israelites must have felt this, on the shores of the Red Sea!) God asserts His easy sovereignty, and plucks victory out of the very jaws of defeat and disaster. With this awesome climax to the revelation of God's past judgments on His enemies, Habakkuk trembles in holy fear as he realises that God has shown him these things as an indication of what He is going to do in his present situation, in the overwhelming and judgment of the Chaldeans. The reference to resting in the day of trouble (16) is interesting and significant, in relation to the trembling and fearfulness. Paradoxically, both attitudes are possible, and indeed necessary. The prophet may well wait quietly for God to work, having received such assurances as are given in the previous verses; but he will not wait complacently; the knowledge of such judgments as he now saw were sure to come, must surely bring awe and trembling upon him. It can never be a matter of complacency to see the judgments of God fall upon men, for we too are men, sinful men at that. "Be not high minded", this word seems to say to us, "but fear".

27) 3:17-19

Here is the full flowering of Habakkuk's faith at the last, and we see the fulfilment of the words in 16 about resting in the day of trouble, and of the meaning of his name, "clinging to God". The verses are of wide application in the spiritual life, and first of all we must understand them in the context of what the chapter as a whole teaches. Habakkuk has been given to see the greatness and majesty of the Lord in such a way that this becomes the one great circumstance in life that makes all else pale into insignificance by comparison. What if natural misfortune devastate the land, with crops failing and cattle destroyed by plague, let things come to their worst if they will, but the prophet now has such a conviction about the sovereignty of God as to turn black disaster into hope and expectation. God ruleth on high, and such a situation is nothing to Him to transform in an instant. The "yet" in 17 compares with the phrase in Paul's writings, "But God...." and sets the plight of man in the context of the power of God in such a way that there is no room left for disquiet of spirit or anything else but utter confidence and trust. More of this in the next note.

28) 3:17-19

Habakkuk's experience is strangely similar to that of the patriarch Job. The Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, but it was not his questions that He answered, so much as himself, and He did so by such a revelation of His power and majesty that all questions were silenced, and the patriarch made content to trust Him in the darkness. It is very wonderful to have all the urgency taken out of the agonising questions that vex the spirit like this, and find a new deep trustfulness pervading the spirit. Darkness is no longer an unsurmountable obstacle to faith when the sense of the Divine presence and power is so real and assuring. Both Habakkuk and Job proved this in no uncertain way. It is also wonderful to realise how truly and unreservedly we may joy in God and rest in Him in deepest fulfilment while all sorts of questions remain unanswered. To wait till faith passed into sight before allowing ourselves fully to trust Him would be a contradiction in terms and a denial of faith altogether, but this is often what in effect we do when we are restless and distressed because we do not understand. Let us emulate Habakkuk's faith; we have been given, in Christ, a far greater and more convincing "theophany" than even he could have seen. Knowing Him in Christ's person and work, why should we not trust Him fully?

29) 3:17-19

One last word at the end of our study. These verses may legitimately be spiritualised in relation to the longing and prayer of the Church for revival. We are never to be complacent, of course, when revival does not come (God forbid!) but we do well to remember that the object of our faith and hope must not be revival, but God Himself. Some people are so concerned with revival that they tend to lose sight of Christ Himself, in much the same way as there are those so preoccupied with holiness that it has become a snare beguiling them from the simplicity that is in Christ. If we feel we shall never be satisfied until God sends a mighty awakening, the question still has to be faced, "What if God does not at this time purpose to revive His Church?" What then? It is here that we see how healthful Habakkuk's attitude is (19). Not that we turn from the hope of revival to joying in God as a kind of consolation prize. That would be distorted, topsy-turvy thinking with a vengeance! No; it is that joy in God is our truest fulfilment. It is what we were made for, as it is also the beginning of all straight thinking, about revival or anything else. Our first priority is to be right with Him, to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever; only thus do we learn to allow Him to do His own work in His own way and in His own time. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise. We may safely trust Him.