

## George Philip Bible Readings

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## 1:1

We know nothing about the man Habakkuk except his prophecy. That he is a true prophet is not in doubt but in his utterances he was concerned not so much with speaking to people in the name of the Lord, as speaking to God, standing in God's presence as intercessor for the nation in a time of terrible trouble. He grappled with the problem of why evil is allowed to flourish and how a good and righteous God can allow wickedness to rampage the earth, apparently with impunity. The prophecy is full of questionings as to why and how long certain things were going to be allowed. The prophet's theology was sound and he had no doubts as to either the sovereignty of God or His righteousness. But he could not tie up his theology and the experience of his generation. According to his firmly held doctrinal position, God should be doing certain things. But God was not doing them. Why? This is what exercised the man's heart. In this he is in company with Psalm 73 and Job 23, together with 2 Thess. 2:1-12. In man's limited vision and understanding there is always a mystery in the working of iniquity, but God is never baffled. Think of our Lord's magnificent utterance in the Garden of Gethsemane (Lk. 22:53), "This is your hour, and the power of darkness." Think also of His command to the emissary of the kingdom of darkness, "What you are about to do, do quickly." (John 13:27) In the faith of God we must never be afraid to look the realities of experience right in the eye.

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## 1:1

When we studied this book in 1966 in our Bible Study we introduced it with these words: "The question arises what is God doing *now* in relation to the church which is being assailed, *missionary work* which is being restricted by national governments, *wickedness* which is becoming more and more arrogant because there is no concept of retribution in men's minds and consciences, and the whole range of *politics* which is becoming more and more involved, more and more international (as are trade, travel, food and economics)?" What does it all mean? This was Habakkuk's burden. Empires were rising up; powers were overshadowing each other; the future was uncertain; and it seemed that righteousness was suffering most. This man was struggling with the problem of divine justice in a complicated and evil world. He was a man of faith and his baffled and intense questionings arose from faith *not* unbelief, as the similar questions in 2 Pet. 3:3-7 do. There is all the difference in the world between faith and unbelief. Faith cries out that there must be an answer and looks to God. Unbelief says there is no answer and casts God aside. Some say that the name Habakkuk comes from a Hebrew word meaning "to clasp" and this would portray the prophet as a man holding fast to God or wrestling with God. He got his answer, which was in part an exhortation to learn what God was like (cf. Job 38:1-11) and to remember that "God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain." (Hymn "God moves in a mysterious way" Cowper)

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## 1:1

There is no certainty as to the historical setting of the prophecy and up to a point the interpretation depends on which of the two main suggestions is adopted. Most people say Habakkuk fits in somewhere in the long lifetime and ministry of Jeremiah, but some date it as early as the reign of the wicked king Manasseh (who reigned half a century) around the year 700 B.C.. Others say it is to be dated at the time of Jehoiakim, another evil king of Judah who reigned about 600 B.C.. If we take the earlier date and consider Manasseh's reign (2 Kings 21:1-16), then the sins, evil and oppression are those of civil disturbance and disorder in the life of the people of God, and the rising power of the oppressor is to be seen as an instance of judgment beginning at the house of God (1 Pet. 4:17-19). If we take the reign of Jehoiakim, we are dealing with the situation immediately after the life and influence of the good king Josiah which lasted for 31 years. There had been basic reformation, if not authentic revival. There had been an apparent turning to righteousness and yet the evil nations were scourging Judah. What did it all mean? After Josiah came Jehoiakim (2 Kings 23:24-24:6). You say it is all confusing? Yes, because we insist on taking little sections of history and considering them as independent situations. History flows, and the muddy waters can be explained as much by what has happened up-river as by a sudden explosion at the part we are looking at. Josiah's revival was too little and too late to save the nation.

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## 1:1-4

There were two problems pressing in on the prophet. The first was the national and international situation and the second was that of unanswered prayer. Whether the troubles spoken of refer to internal disorder in Judah, spiritual, moral, social and economic sins, or to the oppression of the "righteous nation" from without by another nation, the basic bafflement was the same. Judah was suffering for her sins whether or not she acknowledged it and a great power, possibly Assyria, was God's rod of chastisement. But at the same time a greater power, the Chaldeans, were being raised up to oppress the oppressor. It is complicated. Of course it is! Ever since the Fall in the Garden of Eden the world's experience has been one of confusion and disorder in which the dual purposes of salvation and judgment have been and are operating. We tend to be baffled and frightened by God's permissions of evil but we need to be reminded that evil never has the initiative. It is God alone who rules and disposes in the kingdoms of men (Dan. 4:17; Isa. 45:1-13), and His providential rule is balanced, accurate and purposeful. He is sure in all His ways and no part of the entire cosmic, universal and historical situation is ever outwith His sovereign control. His eye does indeed run to and fro throughout the face of the whole earth (2 Chron. 16:9; cf. Zech. 1:10-11). We need to be careful of the spirit in which we say, "Why does God allow ....." because all too often we speak in an attitude of complaint which in fact is accusing God of imbalance and unwisdom if not of injustice.

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## 1:1-4

Belief in the over-ruling providence of God and conviction that He makes even the wrath of man to praise Him (Ps. 76:10 AV) does not ever make wrong right. We must never be sentimental about the wrong doing of believers or unbelievers, nor must we be indifferent to the plight of men. "Man's inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn," (Burns) and the grief of God in the face of human suffering is no fiction. Why else did Jesus weep over Jerusalem and have compassion on the crowds who were like shepherdless sheep (Matt. 9:36; cf. Isa. 63:7-9)? Little wonder the prophet cried to God in prayer. But the more he prayed, the worse the situation seemed to get. It is not easy to learn "the patience of unanswered prayer." It is easy to demand an explanation and to ask why God does not act in reviving power. It is wiser to ask why the grim situation has arisen, and in this way our urgent intercession will be tempered by submission. "The fact that we may consider a situation to have come to a point of crisis and extremity does not necessarily present a prima 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." (Rev. J. Philip) God permits evil only for His own good, wise and perfect purposes. He always knows what He is doing and why He is doing it, and that is more than *we* can claim most of the time.

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## 1:5

This verse is astonishing, challenging and comforting. It states clearly and categorically why God at times does not explain to us what He is doing: we would not believe Him. Neither evidence nor testimony would persuade us. This was what happened at the resurrection when the disciples could not believe for joy (Lk. 24:41). Why should this be so? Our prevailing disposition, our inward attitude and our conditioning by circumstances all conspire together so to limit our thoughts of God that we do not and cannot see Him in His glorious, purposeful activity. The prophet was commanded to look among the nations and not just at the domestic life of Judah. His angle of vision was far too small. It is not enough to look only within the church for signs and evidences of God's working. Granted He is building His church which is eternal and cannot fail (Matt. 16: 18); granted He is calling out a redeemed people to be His particular possession; but His ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33) and the glory of God's purposes can never be grasped or measured (Zech.2:1-5) at any one time, in any one generation or in relation to the experience of any one section of the church. When we grieve about the spiritual decline of the church in the West we must balance our assessment by what we hear of the ingathering of thousands in other places. God's work is from eternity to eternity and if we judge it before the time (1 Cor. 4:5) we will end up with strange conclusions and requests (1 Kings 19:4-5, 10).

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## 1:5

Are we capable of recognising God and would we in fact recognise revival if we saw it? The prophet felt God was doing nothing, but God testified that He was working, or setting in motion a work, or putting into effect a plan so vast that the prophet was incapable of being told about it. God does not always hide His designs and some of the high moments of the drama of redemption were shared with men of faith. This is how it was with Abraham in his prayer for Lot in Sodom (Gen. 18:17-19). At other times successive bafflements and contradictions seem the only answers to prayer, as was the case of Paul and Silas in the great missionary outreach of the apostolic church (Acts 16:6-10). Knowing the outcome, we cannot accuse God of being casual or ineffective. His plans were vaster than anything man had yet grasped. This is what Daniel learned in Babylon when, constrained by God's Word, he began to pray for revival. Behind the scenes there were mighty spiritual issues being fought out (Dan. 10:12-14) and this explained the "delay" in visible answers to the prayers. Did not our Lord teach the need for patience and the need to guard against precipitate interference when He taught the parable of the weeds and the wheat (Matt. 13:24ff.)? Let both grow together until the harvest. God's plans are more far-reaching than we know, and time belongs to God not to the Devil. He is defeated and operates under strict limitations.

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## 1:5

It is difficult at times to recognise God and His activity because He tends to hide Himself (Isa. 45:15). Because of this we are apt to regard as tragedy things which are in fact avenues of mercy and blessing. Think of Faber's hymn:

"Workman 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.

"He hides Himself so wondrously,  
As though there were no God;  
He is least seen when all the powers  
Of ill are most abroad."

Habakkuk should have learned by now what God was like, for he had the stories of Israel's history as his spiritual instruction. Think of the astonishing but effective methods of God's grace. Joseph was sold into slavery in a long-term miscarriage of justice, but God was in it (Gen. 50:20). Moses was placed in Pharaoh's palace to be trained as a statesman, not just to bring down Egypt, but to be the leader and lawgiver of Israel. He coped because he looked upon things invisible (Heb.11:27; 2 Cor. 4:18). David dwelt with Saul. Daniel spent seventy years in Babylon but was prepared thereby to be God's key man in due time (Dan. 9:1-3). Peter's imprisonment inspired the church to pray (Acts 12:1-5). Paul's imprisonment gave us so many of the epistles. The persecution of the church in Jerusalem seemed tragedy, but it led to the scattering of the fires of revival. The foul murder of the Son of God seemed the culmination of evil's triumph until we read Acts 2:22-24. God does move in a mysterious way (at least mysterious to us) His wonders to perform. This was what Habakkuk was discovering.

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## 1:6-11

When you consider the horrendous description of the power and attitude of the Babylonians (Chaldeans) you see more clearly why God did not explain things to the prophet. Here was a nation ruthless in evil; how could God be in any way involved with such things? Habakkuk's spiritual vision could see nothing but swift judgment being meted out to such evil, but it was not in fact happening and this was his burden. It was as well he did not yet realise that the Babylonians were to prosper and Judah was to be brought down. Could he have coped with

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such truth even if it had been spelled out to him at that point? God's reticence is for our good to teach us to walk by faith and to trust Him. A wrong preoccupation with knowing the future can prey on the mind, condition us to disaster, and become a total snare of the Devil. Have nothing to do with "fortune-telling". Leave the "times and seasons" where they are safe, in God's own keeping (Acts 1:7). He will interpret and make plain all things *at the right time*. This is not easy to cope with in the face of terrible evil, yet God commanded His prophet to look with honest assessment at the developments of the international situation and to believe that He was in it as the instigator of all change, triumph and disaster. He is the God of history and there is no one with the right or power to question Him, let alone call Him to judgment. This is the sovereignty of God and we must grasp the truth of it in order to rest in it.

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### 1:6-11

Evil is not a pretty sight. It can fascinate and attract and seem altogether desirable at times, as in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:6). But when it feels it has gained the initiative it flies its true colours. This is why we need to cultivate a spirit of discernment (Heb. 5:14). Here in Habakkuk's story is a power that is totalitarian and military, quite devoid of the customary restraints of humanity. These people are a law unto themselves (7) and consequently never pause in their ravaging to question their motives or objectives. There is a hellish and absolute certainty about their entire disposition. They are ruthless hunters (8) and their reputation instils an anticipatory dread among the peoples, the kind of fear that paralyses both thought, and action and conditions people for panic and defeat. The Devil goes in for psychological warfare as well as for fiery assaults (Eph. 6:10ff). How we need clear heads for the business of Christian service. There is a self-absorption in these people (11) which is paralleled in the ambition of Lucifer himself (Isa. 14:12-14). Today's verses seem to portray an unlimited and unchecked progress, but if we read v.11 in the AV or RV we find we are being shown the point of change. This evil power "crosses the bounds" or reaches the limit of God's permission. Unknown to itself the Babylonian power had been raised up specifically as an instrument of God's chastisement of His own people and existed only to fulfil God's will. There may be some veiled reference to the "god" behind the Babylonians, a spirit of evil urging them on. Whatever the detailed interpretation, the message is clear. God alone is in charge of the entire situation.

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### 1:12-17

The prophet found it difficult to reconcile the righteousness of the sovereign God with the operation of powers allowed to outrage humanity. If God is involved with such brute powers of evil, does it mean He is like them? This is the kind of confused thinking which causes people to say in a spirit of criticism, "Why does a God of love permit wars and suffering?" The very fact that such a question is posed signifies that people's thinking is no longer in biblical categories. The defect of so much modern thinking in its sociological, philosophical and political theory is that it refuses to face the fact that we are part of a fallen, disordered world in which the judgments of God are presently operative. Read Rom.1:18-32; John 3:16-21, 36 and Gen. 3:14-24; 6:1-8, to name but a very few of the passages by which we can begin to understand human experience. There is nothing ruthless, impersonal or uncaring about God. The whole of Scripture testifies to the vast extent of His redeeming love. Granted His ways are past finding out, but He remains a God to be trusted. Certainly He is more to be trusted than people in their fickle, adjustable attitudes and loyalties. When Habakkuk spoke out concerning the righteous purity of the God of light with whom there is no change (James 1:17), he needed also to take the stance of his father Abraham in the business of intercession in the face of the wickedness of men and the righteous judgment of the living God (Gen. 18:22-25).

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### 1:12-17

There is the suggestion that in v.12 the prophet was comforting himself with the thought that the worst would not happen. Much as it seemed not only possible but likely or even unavoidable, he felt that God would not allow His own people to be cast down in disgrace and defeat. But why should this seem so impossible? Habakkuk fell into the trap of comparing sins: the sins of the "righteous" and the sins of the "sinner" nations.

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The prophet took the attitude that "they", the Babylonians, in their military ruthlessness were greater sinners than the "saints" of Judah in their spiritual shallowness, pride and hypocrisy. It is for God to judge! Is it not also necessary to reckon that if God is to punish or chastise His people, He has only the span of a lifetime to do it, whereas He has all eternity to deal with the unrepentant wicked? Put it in this way: salvation in all its glorious aspects is God's priority; judgment is His strange work (Isa. 28:1-4, 11-22; Ezek. 18:30-32). When we begin to wonder why God allows so much wrong, in the church as well as in the world, to go unheeded we need to be reminded that God is not unsure of the outcome as we seem to be. Go to the parable of the weeds and the wheat in Matt. 13:24-30. When the servants of the Lord were eager for instant action they were told to let both grow together *until* the harvest. This was to guarantee the safest growth of the wheat and the surest judgment of the weeds.

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### 2:1

It is interesting and instructive to compare this prophet's action with that of Jonah, who in the first instance ran away from God and in the end sat down in resignation, offended and disappointed by God (Jonah 1:3; 4:1-3). Both men were at cross purposes with God, baffled by God's activity, intentions and lack of activity, but Habakkuk, his faith sorely baffled, went to God. This is what we have to do with problems: take them to God in person, wait on God for His word of explanation or interpretation, and begin to see our situations in the true perspective of the strategy of God's perfect purposes. These purposes are presently and dynamically being worked out in the affairs of both church and nation. The prophet takes his stand as watchman on the city wall. Understand it in spiritual terms. He goes higher, to a surer viewpoint, to get a more extensive view of things. In doing so he is acknowledging, even in his determined arguing with God, that there may well be things he has not yet seen, or having seen has not understood nor discerned their significance. This is a wise procedure in dealing with all situations, especially those involving ourselves and those naturally dear to us. There is a close involvement which produces distortion in our view. We must commit the unsolved problems to God and then stand back and wait for His answer.

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### 2:1-3

Note clearly that Habakkuk did not adjust, let alone abandon, his theological position because experiences and circumstances seemed to contradict it. In fact, he stood on what he had known and proved concerning God, and asked for fuller and clearer light. This is what we learned recently in studying Psalm 85. From the wording of v.1 and its suggestion of dialogue, it seems clear that Habakkuk was not expecting an easy answer to his problem and complaint, yet his eyes were on God. In one sense there is an element of desperation in all true prayer, because when we cry to God we are confessing that we are at an end of ourselves; we have no further suggestions; there is nothing we can do; the whole thing is too big for us, and so we take it to God and wait.

There is nothing else we can do, other than take the problem back and try to solve it ourselves. Without doubt the Devil will keep trying to trap us and imprison us mentally and emotionally in the problem we have in fact committed to God. This we must refuse. We must extricate ourselves from the mass of complicated bafflement and wait for God to speak and act. We must not interfere, seek to manipulate, nor set "conditions" within which God must act. We must trust God. This is peace. Read Phil. 4:4-7; 1 Pet. 5:6-11. The prophet had no idea when the answer would come nor how it would be expressed, but he looked to God. His eyes were on God. That is the wisdom of faith

(2 Chron. 20:12; Ps. 123:1-2).

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### 2:1-3

God's answer to the prophet's determined, spiritual realism is given in v.2-3, and it is brief and to the point. In one sense it is not very specific, unless it refers back to 1:5-11, to what God had already stated. There is no variableness with God (Jas. 1:17), and He cannot lie (Heb. 6:18), therefore He will do what He has stated to be already in motion. This was what the prophet was commanded to write down in clearest statement for an immediate and permanent record, so that even in the rush of events people might read it and take swift action.

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God said to Habakkuk that He was raising up this Babylonian power and, after they had swamped Israel, they in turn would be cast down by His power. The prophet was assured that there was absolute certainty about this matter and that it would come to pass in God's appointed time. It might seem slow, but appearances are deceptive. God is never late. Everything He does is done when the fullness of the time is come (Gal. 4:4). His time-tabling is a private matter (Acts 1:7) and, with regard to both timing and method, He allows no human or demonic interference (Heb. 1:1-3). There is something exact and specific about all God's workings (Rev.9:15; 10:6) and this should counteract all our doubts and fears when we are faced with God's seeming inactivity or inaccuracy. Faith not only has to wait, it is willing to wait, as for example Noah waited for 120 years while the Ark was being built (Gen. 6:3; 1 Pet. 3:20). Of course he did not waste the time. He preached (2 Pet. 2:5).

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### 2:1-4

The vision waits its time and, in the terms of Psalms 42 and 43, the prophet must refuse to be cast down. The vision pants or longs eagerly for its day, for even though its fulfilment is costly and mingled with judgment, its issue is salvation and life, cf. Rom. 8:18ff. The good will and glorious purpose of God press on in irresistible dynamic, and the prophet must see his own experience and that of his generation in the light of the future developments of that will. Prophets must always do this and must never limit what God is doing to the narrow confines of their own time or understanding (1 Pet.1:10-12). This battling in faith with circumstances has always been the experience of faith as Heb.11:32-40 testifies. Faith stands on God's sure promises (2 Pet.1:4) and reminds itself that time belongs to God, and that "the slow watches of the night" are as significant as the exciting hours of high noon. Think of Cowper's great hymn,

"God moves in a mysterious way,  
His wonders to perform;

"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;

"God is His own interpreter,  
And He will make it plain."

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### 2:1-4

God gave Habakkuk reassurance rather than explanation. He declared (4) that evil, however arrogant, cannot survive let alone triumph. Therefore if the righteous (the just or justified) will hold fast in faith to the faithfulness of God, they will not only outlast evil in its day of power and come to clear understanding of the mysteries of God's will, they will come to victory and will rejoice in the God of their salvation. It will help here to look on to v.14 and v.20 and then on to 3:17-19, where the prophet eventually declared that though there be a total lack of evidence of harvest he would still trust in God and rejoice in His salvation. This is faith indeed. But note in today's verses the reality on which faith is grounded. God indicates to the prophet that He is not in any sense taken in or deceived by the strutting, ravaging of proud evil. There is a total contrast in v.4 between faith and unbelief, and the life styles which flow from them. The first half of v.4 is difficult to translate, but it makes plain that pride and faith are mutually exclusive. G.A. Smith renders it, "Lo, swollen, not level is his soul within him .... The soul of the wicked is radically morbid: inflated, swollen (perverted), not level, not natural and normal. In the nature of things it cannot endure." Evil can only disintegrate. How we need to remember this! It has no future. It is not so with faith which produces endurance, steadfastness and integrity, and holds on to God in loyalty and duty, believing Him and resting in His faithfulness, come what may.

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### 2:1-4

The second half of v.4 is so important we stay with it another day and should note in passing the quotation of these words in the New Testament (Rom. 1:17; Gal. 3:11; and Heb. 10:10, 32-39). In the first two references the emphasis is undoubtedly on justification by faith alone, while the reference in Hebrews is concerned with the

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quality or disposition of life that issues from faith. Living by faith is a rigorous business which involves, time and time again, the mighty fight to believe God in the face of the most baffling of experiences. You take God at His word and you believe simply because God has said it (Acts 27:25). Habakkuk's problem was that he could neither see God nor trace His working in his situation and he had to learn to endure "as seeing Him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27; 2 Cor. 4:18). Faith does not have to pretend it sees all the issues clearly. Think of Daniel's young men (Dan. 3:16-18). They made certain affirmations regarding God and drew certain conclusions *as far as* they could assess, but at the same time they left the door open, for they recognised that God had the right to act according to His wisdom and not necessarily in answer to their specific affirmations. Faith trusts God even through death (Job 13:15 AV). Even if our lifetime does not demonstrate the faithfulness of God in respect of specific situations, God will still remain faithful (Rom. 3:3). This is our rock and refuge.

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### 2:5-8

The first of a series of "woes" or warnings is introduced by v.5, the meaning of which is difficult. Whether it speaks of the drunkenness of wine or of greed, the truth is that both are marked by and are driven on by a craving that can have no satisfaction. Both drink and greed are virulent and become obsessive, even though at the beginning they may appear reasonable, innocuous and manageable. In their operation the voracious appetite devours all in the pursuit of satisfaction. But the day of reckoning comes, as it must, because "sin, when it is finished, brings forth death." (Jas. 1:15 AV). But note how at the beginning of v.6 it is the victim peoples who take the stand of faith and, however tremblingly, say that time is running out for the oppressor. Their day of reckoning is rushing in on them and there is no escape. Recompense belongs to God and He causes it, in righteousness to operate (Deut. 32:35). But like so many of God's activities it comes *in due time*. All things are open to God's eye (Heb. 4:13) and there is nothing covered that will not be brought into the open (Matt. 10:26). Men and nations will have to live with what they have created: this is the law of the harvest: you sow and you reap with an increase. Violence done to nature recoils on succeeding generations. Liberties taken with our bodies take their toll. Philosophies that distort a nation's thinking about education, law and order, moral standards and the sanctity of marriage bring in their train hideously complicated results that have to be lived with. There is no escape. The way of unbelief is self-destructive. The way of faith is life.

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### 2:9-11

The same theme as yesterday continues in this second woe. "The principles of self destruction and boomerang which are inherent in the nature of sin are of abiding force and apply to all tyranny." Evil gain, which has as its objective self- advancement and the guarantee of permanence, is doomed to failure. Note that the emphasis is not so much on God's activity in judgment as on the natural (perhaps we should say un-natural) outworking of evil in a universe grounded on the righteous laws of a holy God. The stones cry out (Lk. 19:40), as indeed the saints before the altar of God cry out, for that vindication of righteousness which shall surely come (Rev. 6:9-11). It is necessary for men and nations to consider their ways very carefully because it is all too possible to choose a course of life and so stick to it that life itself is forfeited. There is then no remedy. In all this we have been considering the sins of the ungodly but what of the sins of the saints? There are consequences, not only in terms of earthly joy and fruitful service, but in terms of losing, not our salvation (that cannot be lost since it is God who justifies Rom. 8:33), but our eternal reward. Consider well 1 Cor. 3:10-15 and 2 Cor. 5:10. Habakkuk was being shown how unnecessary it was for him to be over-anxious about the activity of evil. Given time it will bring itself to judgment (Matt. 13:30).

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### 2:12-14

Social injustice and political corruption have become almost accepted elements in contemporary life, and society seems to have lapsed into an attitude of resignation because it seems that nothing can be done either to bring wrongdoers to justice or to bring their operations to an end. Don't leave God out of the reckoning! Recall God's startling confrontation of Cain in Gen. 4:8-16. Just as the voice of Abel's blood cried to God for just retribution, so the clamour of evil always comes before God and He takes action (Gen. 18:20-21; Ex. 3:7-8).

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But there is more emphasis here on the futility of unbelief in all its strenuous activity to establish itself. Read Isa. 50:10-11; 55: 1-3, 6-7. Wrongdoing can never have a good or healthy outcome. Its life stream is in quite another direction, as Rom. 1:18ff makes quite plain. Whichever way you look at it, honesty towards God is the best and the only policy. Let us emphasise, as we have done in other places, that the present day tensions and hatreds in race relations, in class warfare, and in the employer-employee situation all stem from past injustices when people with opportunity and capacity used other people as instruments of gain and advancement. What we sow, we reap! Do right by God and by others, even if you suffer for it (1 Cor. 6:1-11). It is the way the Master went.

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### 2:14

This one verse is an immense comfort and gives us the basic reason why we need never panic in the face of the apparently successful rampaging of evil. Do what they will, the earth shall be filled, as to knowledge, with the glory of God. "Our little systems have their day; they have their day and cease to be." (Tennyson) God's holy Zion, His glorious work of redemption, is founded on the everlasting rock and cannot be moved. The worldling's kingdom and its pleasures are but for a season and throughout its time span these pleasures fade away (Ps. 39:4-6; Isa. 40:6-8). The same promise of the glory of God is found in Isa. 11 1-10; 66:18-23. Indeed the whole of Scripture points us forward to this glorious consummation, and this proves to be a most practical element in the business of Christian life and service, as both Paul and John testify (2 Cor. 4:16-18; 1 John 3:1-3). We do ourselves a disservice by not maintaining this forward look. It is not escapism. That would be the case *only* if the coming glory was a fiction. It is fact. Read Isa. 40:3-5; Rev. 1:7; Matt. 24:29-31; Mk. 8:38; Phil. 2:9-11. It is not for nothing that we sing,

"Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Does his successive journeys run;  
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more."

Well may we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." There is nothing surer!

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### 2:15-17

The reference to drink and drunkenness can be taken either literally or metaphorically. It may refer to the foul outrages of the victorious soldiery, and we do not need to elaborate on the shame and degradation that can so easily blight a nation in the wake of drink. Isa. 28:7-8 tells a story that is all too common yet it is only now that both church and nation are beginning to be alarmed by the sheer dimension of the problem. Alcohol is an alarming curse, not least because of the sheer amount of money involved, together with the sinister effect on both health and morals. World medical statistics cry out the same testimony as Scripture, but who believes the report? Who wants to believe, when profit is involved? This is exactly Habakkuk's message. But he makes it plain that the cup will come round to those who first dispensed it and they will have to drink it (Rev. 16:19; Isa. 51:17; Ps. 75:6-8). With what measure you mete it will be measured to you again (Matt. 7:1-2AV). There will come a time when people's decisions will recoil on themselves and they will find the very life they have instituted to be unbearable. It will be no use then saying, "Stop the world, I want to get off." That is irresponsible self-centred escapism. What is needed is repentance, and that is very different from being sorry for ourselves (2 Cor. 7:9-10). Part of adulthood, humanly and spiritually, is a recognition that we must live with our own decisions. That is our cup to drink. But there is also the Lord's cup (v.16b) and it is given to drink. "Drink is bad enough when it is taken for its own degrading pleasure and there is no accounting for the peculiar changes it produces in different personalities, talkative or taciturn, riotous or dour, vicious or violent. All these have a way of bringing out the dregs of the evil nature; but when drink is used in cold blood to weaken the will of others and reduce them to tools of vile and perverted lust, this is a wicked thing. And here again the reward is of its own kind, for as they have done to others, so shall be done to them." (Rev. W. Still)

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## 2:18-20

God's word is very searching, and Habakkuk was faced now with the challenge of idolatry, which applied as much to Israel as to the Babylonians but which carried more condemnation to the people of God. There is some explanation, if not excuse, for the heathen who have never known the light and truth of the gospel when they worship dumb idols which may not be so innocent as appearance suggests (1 Cor. 8: 4; 10:19-20). But there is neither excuse nor justification for the people of God with all their privileges when they turn from God to idols. Now the essence of idolatry is deception. Idols purport to be living gods but are in fact dead material, insensitive and incapable of doing anything. They are totally dependent on people for their existence and authority (until of course they become instruments of the dark power of Satan). Think of the scorn and rebuke the prophets poured on idolatry in Isa. 40:18-20; 46:5-7; Ps. 115:4-8; Ps. 135:15-18. Isn't it strange that man made in the image of God degenerates into representing god in the form of man, or beast or some hideous hybrid creature (Rom. 1:21-23)? This is the distortion and blindness of sin. If we could only see ourselves as we really are when we turn away from God, the sight would be so ludicrous and tragic that, like the prodigal, we would see and sense just how well off we had been in the Father's house with all its gracious discipline of love and truth.

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## 2:20

This last verse, solemn as it is, nevertheless draws out the heart in glad relief, trust and hope. Our God is neither blind nor dumb, nor is He a victim of circumstances trapped in the travail of history. He is sovereign in every sense of the word. His ways are past finding out (Rom. 11:33-36); and He is the God of peace (Heb. 13:20) because there is no doubt in Him. "Not only must the heathen be silent, but Christians must keep silent too. There must be no querying, no questioning, no uncertainty about the goodness and the holiness and the power of God. Do not complainingly ask, 'Why does God allow this?' or 'Why does God do that?' Consider the Word of the Lord to His prophet. Look up to God. Look at the ultimate and the absolute. Then let us put our hands upon our mouths that are so ready to speak foolishly. Let us realise that He is there in the temple of the universe, God over all. Let us silently humble ourselves and bow down before Him and worship Him. Let us magnify His grace, His might, His power, His goodness, and in the quiet peace of heart and mind and soul wait for Him." (Lloyd Jones). When we do keep silence before Him, when we do turn down the volume of our chatter and clamour (so often superficial and not all that relevant), and when we do compose our hearts to wait on the Lord (Ps. 27:14; 37:7), what do we hear? We hear God saying, "I am doing a work" (1:5) and that makes sense to us of most things.

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## 3:1-2

The prophet was deeply moved with awe rather than fear, and with joy that was deeply reverent, full of feeling and yet not emotional in the bad sense. He was stirred by the presence and by the speech of the living God, and by the clear enunciation of the presently operating purposes of God. His delay in bringing judgment to bear upon evil did not mean God was overlooking the situation but rather that He was preparing a decisive stroke, the significance of which would stretch far beyond Habakkuk's immediate situation or generation. What God had just been declaring to the prophet is in harmony with what he had been taught regarding God's activities in the past (Ps. 44:1-4, 23-26; Ps. 85:1-7), and this is not surprising since God is consistent within Himself and in all His ways. In the light of this the prophet prayed for revival. But what do we mean by revival, and would we recognise it if we saw it? God has already said that He is working on a broad scale, furthering His purposes by active decisions (1:5). What more did this man want? It is right that people of faith should pray in the midst of a troubled generation that God should make His power known unto salvation. It is natural that the faithful, feeling the pressures of the situation, should look to God for quickening. In the midst of the years, when we are well past the thrill of the beginning of the work and yet a long way off from the satisfaction of completing the work, it is natural that our hearts should cry out for some clear encouragement. But such a cry must have its beginning and ending in a heart of humble submission to the God who shows no respect of persons.

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### 3:1-2

The prophet's heart was so awed by God's speech that he was no longer concerned with an immediate alleviation of the situation and a quick betterment of experience for Israel. He was praying in the same terms as the Lord's Prayer, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," and if that deliverance was to be accomplished through the strenuous conflicts of temptation and the rigorous disciplines of national judgment, then let it be so. This is what it means to humble ourselves under God's mighty hand (1 Pet. 5:6). When we are more concerned with learning what God is teaching us and more exercised about the spiritual health of our lives rather than feeling sore about what is going on around us, then we are indeed on the mend and likely to go forward with God (Heb.12:5-13). What is God saying? What is God teaching us? These are the vital questions which are all tied up with revival. Habakkuk did not ask God to take away all the troubles. The man had been too concerned about the troubles, evil and terrible things, and they had drawn his eyes off God. Now he was saying, "Lord, whatever it all means, and whatever is to come, preserve your work alive in all the turmoil; make it stronger, truer and purer." God's work will not be overwhelmed but its strength lies in its purity. "The heathen shall know that I am God, when I am sanctified in you before their eyes." (Ezek.36:23 A.V.) This is revival.

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### 3:3-4

A sense of history and a recognition that it is "His story" is part of spiritual health and service. The prophets of Israel were always, especially in crisis, telling the people of God to remember what their God had done in the past. The rolling storms and the convulsions of nature are spoken of in terms of the activities of God. Of course thunder and lightning were always associated with the mighty manifestations of God on Mount Sinai, and it was a pillar of cloud and fire that led Israel in her wanderings (Ps. 18:1-19; Ps. 68:7-10). Think of the visions of God in the Books of Daniel and Revelation. There are echoes through this third chapter of Habakkuk of the stories of Israel from the Exodus to the time of Joshua, and of the great miracles of the prophets; and of how God made the sun stand still and the stars fought in their courses (Josh. 10:12-14; Judg. 5:20). How dull we have become in that we have denied ourselves the thrill of God's power by bowing at the shrine of science which some regard as so almighty that what cannot be *proved* is just not allowed to be.

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### 3:4

We tend to be more interested in the manifestations of God's power than in the hiding of it, and like the unbelieving Jewish leaders in the time of our Lord we are constantly asking for "signs", assuming that they will in fact strengthen and encourage faith. It may be that signs and wonders are more a concession to weakness than anything else, and certainly in our Lord's temptation (Lk. 4:9-12) the suggestion that Christ might overpower people and awe them into submission by astonishing acts was well and truly refused. There is a "hiddenness" in the working of God's kingdom that is the very way by which faith is drawn out into full and authentic expression. God does hide Himself (Isa. 45:15) and He does so in order that He might the more fully reveal Himself to people who could not for a moment survive the full shining of His glory. What Habakkuk seems to be saying here is that the manifestations of God's power which people have seen and known and wondered at are in fact nothing compared to what could have been and what in fact is even now in the glory of eternity. Read Job 26 and consider the phrase, "the outskirts (edges) of His ways." It is best that we should see through a glass darkly (1 Cor. 13:12) provided we remember that it is only "the splendour of light" that hides God from our eyes. But we shall see Him face to face. That will be quite a day!

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### 3:5-10

We do not need to go into the detail of these graphic descriptions of God's mighty activities in the past. They speak of God's might, majesty and power. He is indeed the King of creation and His ways, though past finding out, are everlastingly consistent. He is never capricious. He is no local deity whose jurisdiction is limited to a few tribes or a few square miles of territory. Plague and pestilence do His will, and earthquake, wind and fire are as but nothing compared to His still small voice (1 Kings 19: 11-12). The nations are as a drop in the

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bucket (Isa. 40:15) before the name and fame of Him who is the Lord of Hosts. Read Psalm 104 and the hymn drawn from it, "O worship the King, all glorious above."

"O tell of His might, O sing of His grace,  
Whose robe is the light, whose canopy space.  
His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,  
And dark is His path on the wings of the storm."

This is the God of salvation we speak of, even though His ways seem so often ways of judgment. But His judgments are not only retributive; they are restrictive, holding back and shattering the concerted powers of evil in order that His people might move forward into His everlasting salvation. We have echoes here of the earthquake that accompanied the Crucifixion when Christ spoiled principalities and powers (Col. 2:15) and destroyed the works of the Devil (1 John 3:8) so that life and immortality might be brought to light in the Gospel (2 Tim. 1:10). If we have eyes to see we can discern here in Habakkuk an indication of spiritual warfare, and that is no easy and quiet battle. After all, the powers of evil are in possession (1 John 5:19) and have to be overthrown.

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### 3:11-15

What a picture we have here of the greatness and the activity of the God of salvation. There is reference to Joshua 10:1-4 which makes thrilling reading, but such incidents are to be found right through Scripture. On the one hand you have the people and work of God always harried and hunted by the enemy and on the other the Lord Himself intervening when the situation has reached, from a human viewpoint, crisis proportions. But *God* is never in a state of crisis. He is far too competent and is always going forth for the salvation of His people. Read the Song of Moses in Exodus 15:1-21. This is a God to trust even "when all around my soul gives way," and "when darkness seems to veil His face." There is in fact unchanging grace and this is our hope and comfort. We all tend to be too aware of the hosts of evil and enmity, and forget the heavenly hosts sent forth from the throne of God to minister to the heirs of salvation (Heb. 2:13-14). We need our eyes opened to things as they really are (2 Kings 6:11-17). As Habakkuk rehearses past history, he is assured that his God is indeed able to save to the uttermost (Dan. 3:16-18; Heb. 7:25 AV). What God has said, He will do (Num. 23:19). When the Devil assails us with doubt, the thing to do is to rehearse all the "crisis" deliverances of the past and to ask God to do it again. But we must allow Him to do it in His way and in His time. He will. That is why we must learn to *wait* on Him.

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### 3:16-19

The first of these verses stands by itself and is a summary of, or an expression of, the prophet's reaction to the strong teaching given to him regarding the activities of the Almighty. The remaining verses are the affirmation of the prophet's faith and trust. It is small wonder that the man trembles. Who does not tremble in the near presence of God when He speaks so clearly? It is a graciously awe-inspiring thing to deal with God and to be involved in the outworking of His purposes which are so fundamental and eternal, fraught with both salvation and judgment. Paul knew much about this when he spoke of weakness, fear and trembling, the agitated unrest of his spirit, and the cry, "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor. 2: 16 AV). God has indeed chosen the weak things of the world (1 Cor. 1:26ff.) and perfects His strength in that weakness by His own grace (2 Cor. 12:9). He knows our humanity and remembers we are but dust (Ps. 103: 14). Like a true father He cares for His children, not suffering them to be tempted above what they are able to bear (1 Cor. 10:13). He never deals with them in a way likely to quench their feeble faith or break their weak resolve (Isa. 42:3). Because he had a God like this, Habakkuk was able to rest in the Lord in the day of trouble. Whatever else might happen, this man would not now lapse into either complacency or carelessness.

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### 3:16-19

This is faith indeed. Link the words, "Though ... yet ... God." Here is a man who was not prepared any more to live his life baffled and plagued by the evidences of immediate circumstances. Nor was he prepared to be

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unbalanced by deteriorating circumstances and painful restriction and privation. Whether the nation experienced inflation, economic stringency, lowering of incomes, disappearance of reserves and bank balances, or even famine, he was determined to stand his ground in faith, looking to God. He did not know how God was going to resolve the present predicament with the surging of evil and the complications of spiritual backsliding. But he knew his choice. Let him fall into the hands of God and not into the hands of men (2 Sam. 24:10-14). If God was to lead the situation into deeper travail and suffering, then it would be for good and necessary reasons, and Habakkuk would trust Him in the increasing darkness. In fact, though God were to slay him he would still trust (Job 13;15). This is faith indeed. But remember the trembling in v.16. This man was no stoic. He was intensely human. Yet he was resolved that he would find his joy in the lord. (Phil.4:4). He would rejoice in tribulation (Rom. 5: 3ff.). And when all manner of trials came sweeping in, he would welcome them as friends and not resent them as visitations from an unjust God (Jas.1;2-4 in J.B. Philips translation). Does it not say that in all these things we are conquerors by a clear margin through Him who loved us (Rom. 8:37-39)?

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### **3: 16-19**

To trust God, to find our joy in Him and not just in His work, is important because while the work may fluctuate and have many valleys and many unfulfilled hopes (until we get to heaven) God endures unchanging on. "There is all the difference in the world between the two and the quality of life they produce. The one produces a life which may still be full of care, as we struggle and strain to harness God's power to achieve our own ends; whereas the other is care-free and leaves all to His abundant ministry of supply, and gets on with the blessed business of loving and enjoying. That is why the last verse of the prophecy contains such healthy vigour and verve. Here is a picture of perfect health such as we seldom see.

It is the picture of one who has learned the secret of health even in times of straitest necessity and danger, and can skip to the highest point of life's achievement with radiant and buoyant health and call for the most triumphant songs of joy. We admit there is a limit to human happiness on earth (see Ecclesiastes); but there are times of exclusive faith and unfettered joy when the heart seems to leap from its bodily prison with the agility of the deer or hind to reach the top most pinnacle of joy where it almost ceases to be earthbound, and exults in the stretch of its faith towards the illimitable pleasures of God. There are no questions to be asked then, pertinent or impertinent, but only a heart set free to enjoy the Lord."

(Rev. W. Still)

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