

Habakkuk 2v 18 to 3 v2 From the Problem to the Answer –Turning to God

1. Our Perception of Reality

Perceptions of reality can be misleading. The communities of Dull and Boring have paired up, but other towns have found odd or quirky names a burden. Should they celebrate their innuendo-laden titles? Never before has such a frenzy of interest surrounded Dull and Boring. The latter, a town of 15,000 in the US state of Oregon, has voted in favour of "pairing" with the former, a small Perthshire village. In a version of events suggestive of a whimsical British feature film, the arrangement had been suggested to Boring Community Planning Council by the Dull Women's Book Club. Ingeniously witty the connection may not be, but it has succeeded in generating acres of publicity for the twin settlements. Both hope their link-up will attract tourists eager to be photographed alongside signs displaying legends such as "Dull, in association with Boring". The two latest quirkily-named communities to make the news have long traditions of their own to draw upon. It is thought that Dull's name is derived from the Pictish word for fields, while Boring was named after William H Boring, an early resident [BBC News magazine 6 June 2012]. Too many people in our country wrongly either deny the existence of God, because of an apparent lack of visible activity in current affairs or assume that He is not interested and has withdrawn from active participation with humanity in the light of great evils of recent centuries? Both of these perspectives are false. This important little book attempts to challenge its readers to grasp the bigger picture of what is really going on in history –that it really is His Story – we simply need to learn how to 'read' it.

Habakkuk began with his complaint to God about evil in the world, especially in his own country. He had prayed about it but nothing had happened. God why won't You do something! God's reply was simple: I am doing something –raising up the Babylonians! God how can you do that when they are sinful arrogant and opposed to the things You stand for? How could God teach His wayward people Israel a lesson through the activity of unbelievers? These are great questions we also may have asked. However, by chapter two Habakkuk has turned from worrying to waiting on God. *I will stand on my watch and station myself on the4 ramparts. I will look to see what He will say to me ...* (Habakkuk 2:1). God then gave His servant a revelation concerning God's fivefold critique of the Babylonians and their shortcomings –yet still planned to work through these very flawed people. This is an encouragement to you and me when we feel down and doubt our usefulness to God, that He can still use you and me despite all our weaknesses. The Lord can accomplish more through you and me than we can ever imagine –but we need to entrust our lives fully to Him and allow Him to work in His time for our good and for His glory. In the midst of the five woes are three glorious promises and assurances to God's people that have been foundational in impact on Christian history. **Assurance one in Habakkuk 2:4: the assurance of His grace.** A grasp of this point allowed devout monk Martin Luther to come to a real conversion and trust in God that played a huge part in what we call the Protestant Reformation four hundred years ago. It enabled a fresh realisation of what the gospel is all about. **Assurance two in Habakkuk 2:14 the assurance of His glory throughout the world:** this enabled late-eighteenth century Evangelical Christians to grasp the missionary call of evangelisation around the globe which has led to the incredible growth of the Christian Church over the last two hundred years. This vision of God being honoured by a people worshipping Him and witnessing for Him in every people group and country liberated inward-looking Christians to have a worldwide vision of mission as God had intended from Pentecost onwards (Acts 1:8 – *to the ends of the earth*). **Assurance three in Habakkuk 2: 20-the assurance of His governance in the world.** God is in control of His universe and this world, despite the

outward appearance of the opposite at times. This is so vital because we all face times when we pray and nothing appears to happen. The apparent silence of God can really get to us in some situations. Yet God is in control. This encourages us in worship and especially in prayer. All three are foundational pillars of the Christian life.

2. **The Enticement of Idolatry** (Habakkuk 2:18-19)

(a) **What is idolatry?** It is giving a place in our thoughts, words or actions to someone or something that belongs only to God. So many people have a world view that fits in with their preconceptions of how they wish it to be. A significant proportion of self-proclaimed atheists admit that their convictions have been shaped by the lifestyle they wish to lead. Because they don't want to admit there is a God to account to, they try and banish Him from their thoughts. Paul expressed it this way in Romans chapter one: *They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is for ever praised. Amen* (Romans 1:25). Too often we fall into the trap of thinking that if 'person x' could see a little more evidence for the existence of God then they would put their faith and trust in the Lord. The reality so often is that a worldview that a person may hold onto prevents them from grasping the significance of the evidence already in front of them. It is about wanting the world to be different to what God created it to be. It is also about viewing our own place in the world inappropriately –whether too highly or the opposite denying the significance of our lives and the opportunities God has and will place across our pathway. Lucifer (Satan's real name) suffered from the delusive power of the first lie to view himself more highly than he ought to have done which resulted in his expulsion from Heaven. Isaiah 14:12-14 states: *How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! ¹³You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon ¹⁴I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'* There can only be one person at the centre of your life and mine and only one person in charge of the universe? It is far better when that is the one being God Himself. He alone knows the end from the beginning and all things in between. This then resulted in his determination to corrupt humanity, the pinnacle of God's creation to entice us to doubt the goodness of God and His graciousness towards us. It began in the Garden of Eden with that piercing question: *Did God really say you must not...* (Genesis 3:1b)? Follow up questions sought to widen the trust gap between Adam and Eve and God. The sugar-coating on the bitter pill here was given in Genesis 3:5b: *For God knows when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.* Adam and Eve didn't stop and think – hold on a minute we already know good in abundance –why would we want to know about evil? It never occurred to them how good their lot in life was –until it was gone. Idolatry goes far beyond the bowing down to items a person or a craftsman or woman has fashioned. It is a determination to hold on to a worldview marked by the absence of God and the substitution of self or something else in the place to which God is rightly entitled in our lives. Are you or am I, guilty of idolatry at the present time? No-one else can answer that question for us.

(b) **How to speak to followers of the gods?** *'Of what value is an idol carved by a craftsman? Or an image that teaches lies? For the one who makes it trusts in his own creation; he makes idols that cannot speak.¹⁹ Woe to him who says to wood, "Come to life!" Or to lifeless stone, "Wake up!" Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it.'* (Habakkuk 2:18-19). It is very hard for us to put ourselves in the place of a person who would make this kind of image to represent some kind of god or goddess and place our trust in them –the prophet here speaks of *the one who makes it [the idol] trusts in his own creation.* The contrast for us is given in Habakkuk 2:4: *the righteous will live by his faith...* Our trust is directly in the living

God, our creator, not in things He has made as a substitute for Him. Various authors in the Old Testament contrast genuine faith in God with the inadequate devotion to idols. Psalm 115: 1-8 makes this point very clearly: *Not to us, Lord, not to us but to Your name be the glory, because of Your love and faithfulness.* ² *Why do the nations say, 'Where is their God?'* ³ *Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him.* ⁴ *But their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands.* ⁵ *They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see.* ⁶ *They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell.* ⁷ *They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk, nor can they utter a sound with their throats.* ⁸ *Those who make them will be like them and so will all who trust in them.* How many people in our day religiously read their horoscopes or similar astrological nonsense and swear by it. That is no difference to bowing down to a carved idol and seeking direction for your life from it. Idolatry is never absent from any culture, it just takes different forms. Paul in a discrete way makes this same point in Acts 17 in Athens. It was a city full of statues and altars to numerous gods of the ancient world. This was hardly promising territory for a visiting Evangelist who wanted to tell these people that there is only one true God whom they must worship. How did Paul seek to raise this subject to gain their attention? His opening words are captured in Acts 17:22-24: ²² *Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious.* ²³ *For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.* In this presentation he first commends them for their religious beliefs –i.e. that they recognise there is a higher power or God to whom we are responsible. He has thus got a basis for developing his argument. In our conversations to day with people of other faith we can similarly acknowledge (with Jews and Muslims) the importance of worshipping the one true God or with those of other faiths a statement about the importance of faith so lacking in the lives of many people around us. The kinds of issues to raise with atheists, for example, will be different. One of the biggest intellectual challenges they face is the problem of evil. It is every bit as big an issue for them as for us. Why? because there is good and evil in the world and every honest person knows that. However, for an atheist these value judgements are only meaningful if there is an absolute standard against which to measure events taking place around us. Too often Christians think we are the ones struggling with the most difficult questions –don't forget that accounting for the world without God takes more faith and is a bigger step into the dark than its proponents would care to admit. Paul's second step is to find a basis for engaging their interest. He has spent time noting the names of the gods inscribed on these hundreds of altars. He carefully has found an altar that tells a powerful story that would probably have been familiar to some of his hearers. Why would an altar have such an inscription: *TO AN UNKNOWN GOD*? This is quite simple – six centuries earlier the plague struck Athens. Sacrifices were made to all the known gods to propitiate their anger at whatever wrongs had been committed by the citizens. Yet nothing stopped the plague. A decision was taken to send to Crete for a respected religious leader called Epimenides. He told them that they had failed to seek the assistance of the god who could stop the plague. An altar or altars were dedicated to the god whose names were unknown. Within a day the plague had lessened and within a week it had ceased and the sick people recovered their health. Epimenides also for good measure prophesied in detail about a war due to take place ten years later, which was totally accurate. They were in awe of him. Yet he declined to take a penny in reward, requesting only some measures to be agreed for the common good of residents of a number of Greek city states [D. Richardson, *Eternity in their hearts* (Regal Books, 1981), pp. 8-18]. Paul had found out about the history of the altar he refers to and this provides a strong basis for his sermon that day. Only a handful of people were converted, but many more went away with plenty to think about. Paul quickly moved onto Creation and the Creator, challenging their evolutionary views and then culminated in reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Having first done his homework the apostle gained their respect

and a hearing for his evangelistic message. This was a formal occasion, which is naturally different from an informal short conversation at work. It is never a disadvantage to know a little about the faith of a person you are seeking to witness to, just as it is equally helpful to try to learn a few words of a foreign language when visiting another country.

(c) **Recognising the potential for idolatry in all our hearts** Anything that lessens our affection for God or prevents us from honouring Him with our time, our gifts and financial contributions to His work is an issue to address. It is easy to point to people with an obsessive passion for a sport or a hobby or something else that dominates their whole life, yet there can sometimes be misplaced affections in the Christian life. In Corinth this was a church that had an unhealthy attitude to following particular Christian leaders in the wider world and denigrating others. I Corinthians 1:10-13 states: *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.* ¹¹ *My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.* ¹² *What I mean is this: one of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'* ¹³ *Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised in the name of Paul?* This isn't anything like as big an issue at the present time as it may have been some generations ago when virtually every network of churches had a collective suspicion regarding the theological soundness of most of the other denominations, but it isn't entirely absent today. We need to ask ourselves what am I most enthusiastic about? What do I most want to talk about with other people? Where do I seek guidance when choices have to be made? What are my aspirations and goals for the future? what am I hoping for or praying for, for my children or grandchildren? Asking these kinds of questions will help us evaluate whether we are in danger of giving God less than the place he is entitled to in our lives.

3. **The estimation of God's greatness** (Habakkuk 2:20-3:1-2)

*The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him.*³ *A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth.* ² *Lord, I have heard of Your fame; I stand in awe of Your deeds, Lord, repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy* (Habakkuk 2:20-3:2).

Psalm 46:10 states: *Be still and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.* Habakkuk has been struggling with an issue and we too have our trials as well. When we take our eyes off the Lord and solely on the problem at hand then it can so easily threaten to overwhelm us. I have difficulty believing that there is anyone here who has not had moments in their life when they did not feel overwhelmed by some situation that had arisen in our family circle or in our workplace –and sometimes even in church life. Now Habakkuk has taken a step back from his questions to find a space to worship God. When he recognises in a fresh way how great God is and how worthy He is of all our praise and adoration then his view of the problems he faced had changed. The situation itself was very real and the problems did not go away, but through his encounter with God Habakkuk was changed. This may be what needs to happen sometimes in your life or mine. God may not take away the problem we face, but may give grace to enable us to live with it and endure the inevitable implications of the trial. I am sure each of us has planned a visit to someone going through extremely difficult circumstances and been apprehensive about how we could possibly have anything to say to them that would be either comforting or encouraging. Yet having completed the visit we come away with real joy as that person has encouraged us through the encounter more than we think we could have blessed them! The secret so often I have observed is directly connected to that person's relationship with God. They have encountered Him in a way that strengthens them to overcome their own natural weakness. Some years later after going through the trauma of exile to Babylon, Ezekiel has the unenviable task of bringing encouragement and hope to a totally traumatised people. Not only

have they lost everything from their homeland, but now as slaves digging canals in chains by the River Chebar, a wretched life from which for most there will be no escape until the release of death from this life, what could their pastor Ezekiel possibly say that would bring some consolation? Or where would he even get the strength to speak to them? Ezekiel chapter one describes something of the indescribable of a vision of the glory of God. Ezekiel 1:28 states: ²⁸*Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell face down, and I heard the voice of one speaking...* A personal encounter with the living God was the secret source of strength he received. Although there is much of what he says that is difficult to understand the emphasis of their dependence on the presence and glory of God is abundantly clear. In Ezekiel 10-11, as a result of the literal idolatry of the nation God's glory departed the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet if they would return to the Lord He would return to them. Ezekiel 11:16-24: ¹⁶*Therefore say: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone."* ¹⁷*Therefore say: "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again."* ¹⁸*They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols.* ¹⁹*I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh.* ²⁰*Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.* ²¹*But as for those whose hearts are devoted to their vile images and detestable idols, I will bring down on their own heads what they have done, declares the Sovereign Lord.* ²²*Then the cherubim, with the wheels beside them, spread their wings, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.* ²³***The glory of the Lord went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it.*** ²⁴*The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the exiles in Babylonia in the vision given by the Spirit of God. God's Spirit was not confined to a consecrated place of worship. He would meet with them in Babylonia where they were –if they sought Him with all their hearts. Are we seeking Him as we should? The greater encouragement to the exiles was that God had for them a hope and a future. In Ezekiel 43:1-5, there is a future blessing anticipated in a restored temple in Jerusalem: *Then the man brought me to the gate facing east,* ²*and I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters, and the land was radiant with his glory.* ³*The vision I saw was like the vision I had seen when he came to destroy the city and like the visions I had seen by the River Kebar, and I fell face down.* ⁴*The glory of the Lord entered the temple through the gate facing east.* ⁵*Then the Spirit lifted me up and brought me into the inner court, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple.* Yet this is not our focus or aspiration as Christians, because one greater than the Temple graced this earth with His presence 2,000 years ago. John 1:14 declares: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* Have you seen His glory? Have you met with Him by faith? As a Christian have you taken your eyes off Him and need to regain your focus on Him? Jesus is Lord of all! Does He have that place in your life? It is only when like Habakkuk we take a step back to focus on Him that our trials are seen in their proper perspective. Do we think this world is getting worse and worse –be encouraged Revelations 22:7, 12 and 20 repeat these words of Jesus: *I am coming soon...* Are you ready for the coming of the King? I trust we are even tonight for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

