

Habakkuk 3:1-16 Looking back with confidence at the greatness of our God

Introduction [Scripture reading Mark 9:14-32]

Habakkuk has begun to move his focus from the very real problems of the country in which he lives, and from the means whereby God will act to judge those who have done wrong (and sadly the innocent who will suffer as a consequence of the actions of the wicked), to the One who is sovereign over history. We sing many songs that have words that express 'How great is our God', but do we need to take time out alone with Him and His word to reflect on how great and awesome He really is? I have to confess that in my times of doubt and worries that I have taken my eyes off the Lord and been overtaken by the issues that I as a fallible and limited human being cannot ever resolve. Are you in that place this evening with something going on in your life? It is okay for us to admit it to the Lord as that can be part of the process of overcoming our weakness and becoming more dependent on His strength. This truth was seen so clearly in the story recorded in Mark 9:14-32 where the disciples of Jesus tried and failed to heal a child; where the religious leaders argued about the problem and forgot about the child and then Jesus came and in a pastorally gracious manner reached out to the family and restored the child to wholeness. What happened that caused so many of God's people to fail to be effective in their service for God that day? ¹⁴ *When they came to the other disciples, they saw a large crowd around them and the teachers of the law arguing with them.* ¹⁵ *As soon as all the people saw Jesus, they were overwhelmed with wonder and ran to greet him.* ¹⁶ *'What are you arguing with them about?'* he asked. ¹⁷ *A man in the crowd answered, 'Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech.* ¹⁸ *Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.'* ¹⁹ *'You unbelieving generation,' Jesus replied, 'how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.'* ²⁰ *So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.* ²¹ *Jesus asked the boy's father, 'How long has he been like this?'* *'From childhood,' he answered.* ²² *'It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.'* ²³ *'If you can?'* said Jesus. *'Everything is possible for one who believes.'* ²⁴ ***Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!'*** ²⁵ *When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. 'You deaf and mute spirit,' he said, 'I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.'* ²⁶ *The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, 'He's dead.'* ²⁷ *But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.* ²⁸ *After Jesus had gone indoors, his disciples asked him privately, 'Why couldn't we drive it out?'* ²⁹ *He replied, 'This kind can come out only by prayer [or prayer and fasting].* The issue was not about whether everyone could be healed depending on whether they have sufficient faith or not [untrue in any case], rather the key verse is Mark 9:24 in the cry of the father. He spoke for the vast majority of God's people down the centuries in his heartfelt cry. The disciples and the religious leaders, like Habakkuk in the first part of his story, had taken their eyes off the Lord and onto the circumstances. Thankfully the last chapter of this book encourages us to look up to God and place our lives wholly in His hands. Are you / am I willing to do that –again! We do it and then take it back again, because we think we can manage... what was it that enabled Habakkuk to gain such confidence and encouragement that would allow him to make such a magnificent statement of faith in the final section of his letter? He looked back and remembered what God had done in the past. He had obviously read it and committed a fair bit of the outline at least to memory. The history of God's work with His people in the Bible and in Church history is not to be left to specialists –too precious for that. We can only take comfort in what Habakkuk draws comfort from when we have read and reflected on the acts of God in our personal history and the collective history of the people of God, locally, nationally and throughout the world.

1. Recognising God's acts in history encourages prayer (Habakkuk 3:1-2)

(a) **The description of his prayer** (Habakkuk 3:1) *A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet. On shigionoth.* This is a musical term which indicates that the music will be solemn and serious, the very opposite of a light hearted ditty. It is used elsewhere in several Psalms that are cries to God from the heart about really tough and difficult situations. Psalm 17:1-2 begins: *Hear me, Lord, my plea is just; listen to my cry. Hear my prayer –it does not rise from deceitful lips.² Let my vindication come from you; may your eyes see what is right.* David is surrounded by enemies who are endangering his life. He writes in Psalm 17:10-14 this plea: *They close up their callous hearts, and their mouths speak with arrogance.¹¹ They have tracked me down, they now surround me, with eyes alert, to throw me to the ground. ¹² They are like a lion hungry for prey, like a fierce lion crouching in cover.¹³ Rise up, Lord, confront them, bring them down; with your sword rescue me from the wicked.¹⁴ By your hand save me from such people, Lord, from those of this world whose reward is in this life.* In David's case it was a crisis for himself and his men, for Habakkuk it was a national crisis and the tone of the song was suitably somber to reflect the sense of danger, but also to hint at the glory and majesty of an awesome God. Another Psalmist, in this case the author of Psalm 102, uses this term and form of song to echo his own struggles in a crisis. He begins with an acknowledgement of his personal distress: *Hear my prayer, Lord; let my cry for help come to you. ² Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly* (Psalm 102:1-2), but after some explanation of his predicament makes this observation about the Lord in Psalm 102:12: *But you, Lord, sit enthroned for ever; Your renown endures through all generations.¹³ You will arise and have compassion on Zion, for it is time to show favour to her; the appointed time has come.* This observation provides the turning point for the Psalmists and for Habakkuk. For some time in their distress their energies and focus had been directed at the growing problems and difficulties they were facing. It was emotionally draining and discouraging and their cries to God were getting increasingly frantic. 'Lord -won't You do something!' Then something happened to enable them to look up to the Lord and catch a glimpse of His greatness and His glory. Do you and I need to do that today? It is not a denial of the problems we are facing – but it is a fresh appreciation of the God who stands with us in the situation. It is a recognition of the faithfulness of God to His people. Jeremiah, you may remember, in his little book, *Lamentations* allows us a window into his grief at the trauma of death and destruction and exile in the city he cherished – Jerusalem. Yet in that difficult book there is an extraordinary ray of sunshine that penetrates the gloom, like a patch of blue sky appearing after hours when it has been completely overcast. *Lamentations 3:21-24* says this: *Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: ²² Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail.²³ They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.²⁴ I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion, therefore I will wait for Him.'* Do you need a fresh glimpse of the faithfulness of God? do you need afresh to sense the all-embracing love of God in the midst of the hard times you are going through? Interestingly for the Temple orchestra not all the instruments got to play in this Psalm. Habakkuk 3:19 is a note *For the director of music. On my stringed instruments.* The mood of the piece will never be light or jolly but it builds up gradually and ends with a firm confidence in the goodness of God, which His people will experience in the future. Psalm 102 fits that pattern so well, as does Habakkuk 3.

There is, however, another term that is found in a number of the Psalms, as well as here in Habakkuk 3. You will note part way through verses 3, 9 and 13 the text includes a strange word –*selah*. What does it mean and why is it there in the text? It is important to admit that scholars are not totally clear concerning the meaning of this term. It is found seventy-one times in the book of Psalms, in addition to the three references here. It has been suggested that it is a direction about how some words should be sung or more likely what emphasis

should be expressed as the music is played alongside certain sentences. One commentator indicates that the accompanying music should be played more loudly at these three points in the Psalm in order to enable the worshipper, tangibly, to feel something of the awesomeness of God and His majestic coming (J. Mackay, *Habakkuk*, p. 226). These musical notes indicate very clearly the tone and nature of this Psalm that is also a prayer to God.

(b) **The nature of his prayer** (i) God centred not man-centred ²*Lord, I have heard of Your fame*; it is likely that after his encounter with God this prophet sat down and over time composed this response to the revelation from God. Many of the greatest hymns and songs we sing in church services were written during or after God's intervention into His people's lives. It gives a depth of insight and significance to words that might otherwise be perfectly accurate theology, but not delivered from the heart. When what we say and do is accompanied by a sense of the presence and power of God it creates an expectancy concerning His intervention in our lives day by day. This may not be dramatic or in anyway taking our problems away, but it does give us a fresh vision of God and His love for us in the midst of our daily lives. As Christians we can go beyond Habakkuk and rejoice in the Lord Jesus and what He had done for us on the cross and by sending to assist us the blessed Holy Spirit, our comforter, encourager and enabler. When God is at the centre of all our plans and purposes individually and in our families as well as in our church family, the actual details may not change, but the sense of purpose and perspective concerning the direction of our lives will be all the greater. God is on the throne of the Universe! Jesus is Lord! Hallelujah! In the light of how great God is we are humbled to see how small and insignificant we are in and of ourselves by comparison. Therefore the words of our prayers will be (ii) Spoken with humility by a creature to our Creator *I stand in awe of your deeds*, we do not deserve it for God to listen to our prayers, let alone answer them. When we reflect on the size of this universe and potentially how many creatures He has made that engage His interest, it is mind-bogglingly amazing that God gives attention to the inadequate prayers offered by any one of His children. The contrast between the spirit in which Habakkuk prayed in chapter one is significant. There it echoes with complaints. God that's not fair! He's getting desperate for God to act. Yet was lacking the patience to wait that God was at work, but on a longer timescale and in a way Habakkuk least expected. Now although still as passionate about God's glory in the land, there is a greater trust in God to deliver the answer to his prayers, because of God's consistent track record from the past. On a number of occasions people in the Bible declare that God has kept His promises. Joshua 23:14b is one of the better known ones: *You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed.* Do you need that truth underlining today? The One who desires to hear my prayers is also as delighted to answer them, for His glory and in His timescale not ours. I have said this time and again with respect to our building plans. Proverbs 16:9: *In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.* (iii) Bold requests for more glory to God *Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known* (Hab.3:2); when we come acknowledging the greatness of God and who He is and the glorious attributes He possesses, and at the same time humbly admitting our weaknesses and total dependence on Him, we are then constrained to look up with a passionate and all consuming desire to see greater honour come to His name on the earth. If this is a God who has acted consistently in this way in the past, then my lifetime is equally suitable as the time when the Lord can work in amazing ways in our midst, not just on other continents and in other congregations, but here in this city, in this community, in this church, for the glory of His holy name. Do you know Him? Is He the lord and saviour of your life? Do you need to be bolder in your prayers at this time? Sometimes our prayers are so general that we might not have a clue what it might look like if God did grant our requests! We must never be presumptuous telling the Lord what to do. But when we are claiming His promises

and asking Him to act in accordance with His previously declared plans and purposes to do that which glorifies His name, then we are on very solid ground. (iv) Our relationship always about grace not merit in wrath remember mercy. The fragrance of grace will be experienced around any God-honouring, Christ-glorifying, Spirit-empowered congregation of His people. God does not treat me as I deserve. I let Him down in thoughts words and actions so many times, yet His grace is so amazing freely given to us, reflecting His great love for His Church, the people for whom He died. ‘Mercy’ in the Old Testament can often be a translation of a word that means ‘covenant love’ –that is that He keeps on keeping His side of the bargain, even when we fall short –again and again. This is at the heart of the Gospel and is unique to our faith amongst the world’s religions. This is our God ; we are His people, therefore we go forward with confidence grounded in Him. Or in the words of Psalm 40:1-4a; *I waited patiently for the Lord to help me, and He turned to me and heard my cry.² He lifted me out of the pit of despair, out of the mud and the mire. He set my feet on solid ground and steadied me as I walked along.³ He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see what He has done and be amazed. They will put their trust in the Lord .⁴ Oh, the joys of those who trust the Lord (NLV).*

2. Recognising God’s acts in history leads to adoration (Habakkuk 3:3-7)

(a) The awesomeness of our Creator God ³*God came from Teman,*(Habakkuk 3:3a) Sometimes the language of the Bible can come alive as connecting with our current age and circumstances; on other occasions as here the language is of a very different age and form of expression. *Teman* was the name of a district and its main city in the south of Edom (Jeremiah 49:7; Obadiah 9). Edom as a territory was south and east of the Dead Sea [J. Mackay, *Habakkuk*, p. 225]. What is important is to see what the author intended to communicate to us by his choice of words. Here the word used for *God* was old-fashioned even in his day! It was more commonly used in the book of Job and also in Deuteronomy –the first usage in the Bible in Deut.32:15b, which referred to Israel in a time of rebellion against the Lord: *They abandoned the God who made them and rejected the Rock their Saviour.* This term for ‘God’ is used with reference to God as creator and ruler of the world. The One who is sovereign over all and has everything under His ultimate control; It is very much a picture of God separate from His creation, but upholding all things by His power. In other words in his prayer or expression of praise here Habakkuk begins by acknowledging the greatness of God the creator. This is exactly what happened in the Early Church in the prayer meeting recorded in Acts 4:23-24: *On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. ‘Sovereign Lord,’ they said, ‘you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them.* In context Peter and John had been arrested for their faith and were being held by the authorities but were later released without charge, some thing for which the congregation had been praying. Is this something you ever reflect on the extraordinary work of God as creator? The world did not evolve from nothing to a primeval soup [add billions or millions of years as required] and then humanity arrives eventually! God brought the world into being by the power of His word. Even ardent evolutionist David Attenborough admitted on 6 March 2012: ‘The problem Darwin never solved was how an inorganic molecule became a living one. We are still struggling with this one.’ The Universe is fine tuned for life. There are fifteen constants in the design of the Universe [ie 1×10^{40} chance of it just evolving by chance] that had to happen in a particular way or life as we know it would be impossible. For example other liquids freeze from the bottom up but water from the top down enabling many life forms to survive under a solid icy surface. Your genetic code of DNA if stretched out end to end would reach to the moon and back several times –it all had to be in sequence for you and me ‘to work’ –what an awesome creator we have. The best computers we have

are child's play compared to the complexity inside a single human being. If Habakkuk had something to rejoice about in God as creator –we have many times more reasons. If God created the cells that are the basic building blocks of living organisms with the incredible complexity they possess then how much more does He care about you and me? No wonder we sing: 'O Lord my God when I in awesome wonder consider all the works Your hand has made, I see the stars I hear the mighty thunder, Your power throughout the universe displayed. Then sings my soul my saviour God to You, how great You are, how great You are...[CMP506].

(b) **The covenant love of our holy God** *the Holy One from Mount Paran.* (Habakkuk 3:3b) The second unfamiliar phrase from Habakkuk refers to another aspect of the relationship of God with humanity, in this case His covenant relationship with the Israelites, inaugurated in the Sinai mountains. The desert of wilderness of Paran was the area the Israelites moved to after leaving Sinai. Mount Paran was a significant feature in that region. This place name is also rarely mentioned in the Bible, though it is used in the poem produced by Moses prior to his death in Deuteronomy 33:2. The emphasis here seems to be a general reference to the majesty of God and the sense of awe and wonder amongst the Israelites, at the time of the giving of the Ten Commandments. It evoked a sense of privilege that this amazing being should set His love on an insignificant people and fashion them into a nation and take them on an epic journey to the Promised Land. God is here described as 'the Holy One'. This was the hallmark signature title used of God in the messages of Isaiah, whose prophecies would have been familiar to Habakkuk. The God who is so pure He cannot look upon sin (Hab.1:13a), requires that His people also seek to reflect however faintly His holiness. Leviticus 11:44-45 states: *I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground.* ⁴⁵ *I am the Lord, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.* The impact on individuals to whom this truth was revealed or grasped is an awareness of our own sinfulness in His presence. Isaiah 6 is the classic example of this fact. After a vision of God in all His holy glory, Isaiah's mind became acutely aware of his own imperfections. Isaiah 6:5-7 states: *'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.'* ⁶ *Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.* ⁷ *With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'* A person who catches a glimpse of who God is and a grasp of the sinfulness of their own inner person is in a position to receive the outrageous transforming grace of God that enables us to become more and more of the person God desires us to be, for our good and for His glory.

(c) **The glory revealed of our Almighty God** *His glory covered the heaven and His praise filled the earth.* ⁴ *His splendour was like the sunrise; rays flashed from His hand, where His power was hidden.* (Habakkuk 3:3c-4) Habakkuk 2:14 touched on this theme as a motivation for worldwide missionary service. Here the aim is probably more directed at encouraging us to worship and adore such a wonderful God, as we sense more and more His entitlement to such expressions of praise and thanksgiving for who He is and what He has done. It is difficult for us to find adequate words to use in this context. Exodus 24:17 describes how the Israelites viewed their glimpses of the glory of God on Sinai. *To the Israelites the glory of the Lord looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain.* John in Revelation 1:12-18 had a similar awe-filled encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ: *among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his chest.* ¹⁴ *The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.* ¹⁵ *His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.* ¹⁶ *In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance* (Revelation 1:13b-16). Oh that we may catch a glimpse of how wonderful God is so that we might worship Him more fully as He deserves.

(d) **The judgement executed by our righteous God** (Habakkuk 3:5-7) We rejoice that God is a God of love, but we forget at our peril that He is truly righteous as well. Habakkuk is describing apparently natural phenomena –ironically today sometimes called ‘acts of God’ by insurance companies- and declares that God can use these things to execute judgement on people for their sins. In Exodus chapters seven to twelve there is an account of the plagues God used to challenge the supposed powers of the gods of Egypt and guarantee that His people would be freed from slavery.⁵ *Plague went before Him; pestilence followed His steps* (Habakkuk 3:5); Various actions of God made nations tremble, including His acts in the wilderness for Israel. Joshua 2:9-11 describes the impact of them on the Canaanite peoples according to Rahab. *She said to them, ‘I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. ¹⁰ We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. ¹¹ When we heard of it, our hearts sank and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.* How sad that people can sense something of the presence of God and not want to put their faith and trust in Him. ⁶ *He stood, and shook the earth; He looked, and made the nations tremble. The ancient mountains crumbled and the age-old hills collapsed – but He marches on for ever ⁷ I saw the tents of Cushan in distress, the dwellings of Midian in anguish* (Habakkuk 3:6-7). One day when Jesus returns this will be the reaction of arrogant people who rejected Him in this life and it is now too late, as Revelation 1:7 makes plain: ‘*Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him*’; and all peoples on earth ‘*will mourn because of Him.*’ So shall it be! Amen. What will your reaction be when Jesus returns? Are you ready now?

3. **Recognising God’s acts in history highlights His invincible power** (Habakkuk 3:8-15)

(a) **God the holy warrior** (Habakkuk 3:8-11) ⁸ *Were you angry with the rivers, Lord? Was Your wrath against the streams? Did You rage against the sea when You rode Your horses and Your chariots to victory? ⁹ You uncovered your bow, You called for many arrows. You split the earth with rivers; ¹⁰ the mountains saw you and writhed. Torrents of water swept by; the deep roared and lifted its waves on high. ¹¹ Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of Your flying arrows, at the lightning of Your flashing spear.* God is lord over all –but for our good and His glory. The crossing of the Red Sea in which elite units of the Egyptian army drowned when the waters came back (Exodus 14:21-28); or when the Israelites were supernaturally aided against enemies in Joshua 10:13b-14: *So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the nation avenged itself on its enemies, as it is written in the Book of Jashar. The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. ¹⁴ There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a human being. Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!*

(b) **God the triumphant king** (Habakkuk 3:12-15) ¹² *In wrath You strode through the earth and in anger You threshed the nations. ¹³ You came out to deliver your people, to save Your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness, You stripped him from head to foot. ¹⁴ With his own spear You pierced his head when his warriors stormed out to scatter us, gloating as though about to devour the wretched who were in hiding. ¹⁵ You trampled the sea with Your horses, churning the great waters.* Here in summary a reminder of evidence of the triumph of our king, Amen.