

## **Habakkuk 3:16-19 Looking forward to the future because God is sovereign**

### **Introduction**

What is the most difficult situation you have experienced in life? Oh I'm not asking for a verbal response –you may never have related that matter to another human being. For some people their memories of the horrors of war, or a painful relational breakdown or the agonies of some form of physical, psychological or mental abuse or ... are simply too difficult for them to address without real emotional input and therefore, these memories are buried as deeply in their minds as may be possible with a view to getting on with life in front of us. In such times as these how did we relate towards God? Did you feel unable to pray or was it a real struggle? Or for some people when we are really desperate the words just flow –but if the problem does not go away, how do we handle that issue that is there at the back of our minds, or on the edge of our lives and might intrude once more in the future? Were anger or tears a regular feature at that time? This powerful passage of God's Word speaks into these kinds of situations, but we will only grasp something of the profundity of what is said if we too have gone through some similarly overwhelming trials. Hope coming out of a time of despair, not wishful thinking dreaming that the problems will go away, but a solid ground for confidence in the future because our lives are in His hands;

Rick Lance, a Baptist pastor in Alabama, related the following story from a previous pastorate: I came to the hospital answering a call from one of my church members. His daughter had been in a traffic accident and the situation looked grave. I entered the room with a sense of dread. "What was I to say?". That question became eclipsed by the comment of my deacon friend who looked up with a smile and said, "now we have an opportunity to put into practice what we have learned and we have taught others through the years". He was saying, "now we embrace the Lord who is faithful and practice what we have preached". I didn't say much after that statement because this mature Christian had ministered to me in ways he never imagined. He had "embraced" the Lord in good times and yes in the bad times too. That is a testimony to God's trustworthiness. I pray that it will be ours too as we look to an uncertain future, with faith in a trustworthy God! [Rick Lance sermon online]

Habakkuk has run through the whole range of emotions just as you and I do when the storms of life cross our pathway. The devil can seek to discourage us by telling us that unlike our brothers and sisters at church who don't have their doubts and fears or times of despair or tears we have so far to go in the faith that it is barely worth continuing. What nonsense! Jesus spoke about the effectiveness of faith as small as a mustard seed, but placed in our great God, and therefore, in the right place to seek the resources to stand and overcome through our trials (Matthew 17:20: *Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.*).

### **1. Our Situation may be Serious** (Habakkuk 3:16-17)

*I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.<sup>17</sup> Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the sheepfold and no cattle in the stalls* (Habakkuk 3:16-17) The incredible words of the end of Habakkuk 3 are not spoken at a Sunday School picnic or lying on the beach on a happy summer holiday. If you are in any doubt read Habakkuk 3:16. Had we seen him uttering these words we might have felt tense or nervous for him! What we may never know is whether the Lord had given this prophet an insight into the horrors of the siege and fall of Jerusalem that would destroy his beloved city and country within a few years. If that was the case, then it is easier to understand the depth of emotion as he took his stand and resolved to trust God with his and his nation's future. Let us try and see these words through his eyes and in the social context of Judaea near 2,600

years ago. The economy of Judah was based primarily on agriculture, growing crops and raising cattle. There were the permanent staple crops that people took for granted as available every year, from fruit trees, olive trees and the products of the vine, together with the annual field crops, like wheat and barley. According to this verse, what parts of this economy have failed? The first three items: figs, grapes, and olives – that is, all the permanent crops non-existent! The next item: food from the fields; that is, the annual crops, the staple foods, the source for most of the calorie supply. So neither the permanent nor the annual crops have yielded anything. If this is the experience for more than a year the death rate will be very high indeed. The potato famines in Ireland and the western Highlands and Islands of Scotland in the nineteenth century and other parts of the world today recall the horrors of famine. For many of us the pictures from Ethiopia when Bob Geldorf and Midge Ure organized the Live Aid events in July 1985, when 1.9 billion people in 150 countries watched the concert and presentation, which brought home the reality of the suffering this can bring –an experience that had vanished from our country four or five generations earlier. Yet this was not the worst of it –he raises a further trial: *though there are no sheep in the sheepfold and no cattle in the stalls* (Hab.3:17c); no prospect of any food left at all –as happens in a siege of a major city that has gone on for long enough in the ancient world. How do we translate that into the social circumstances of twenty-first century Britain? Maybe something like this: “Even though I’ve lost everything; even though all my income disappears.” We might say, “When I lose my job and I am ineligible to claim any social security benefits; when I can’t work and am denied my disability living allowance; when the bills come in but no money comes in to the current account at the bank or building society.” Yet his situation was considerably worse than we might ever contemplate as there were no food banks run by Christian or other charitable concerns; there were no agencies like Bethany or Shelter to assist the homeless. It inevitably pointed to death, first the weakest members of society, the very young and the very old and those with health issues. I cannot imagine what it is like to experience such horrors nor can I envisage such circumstances arising in the United Kingdom. I do remember Sandor, a team leader with Hungarian Baptist Aid, describing the scenes when his aid convey, one of the first into the shattered city of Grozny, Chechnya, arrived at the scene of where First Baptist Church had once stood. That magnificent building had been reduced to rubble and the vast majority of the 500-strong congregation murdered in scenes of absolute horror. An examination of the site located a handful of elderly ladies living in the rubble of the foundations of the church. In the trucks they had plentiful supplies of food and medicines and basic items for survival such as tents and blankets; they (the aid workers) asked the ladies who had survived for sometime on rainwater they had collected and dead rats –what they would most like to receive –the response was unforgettable; would he lead them in a communion service. There had been no opportunities since the killings took place. When I first heard him recount that story with its graphic details at a Baptist Union Council meeting in Glasgow some years ago there was not a dry eye in the place. It is in such a context that Habakkuk knew could very easily be experienced in his own country within a few years that he makes this statement.

In essence Habakkuk finds his reason for living not in perishable things, or we might add the material comforts of life, that he described in verse seventeen. On 15 April 1912 when the Titanic was sinking, women and children were being loaded on the lifeboats. A lady apparently asked permission to run back to her room one last time for something she did not want to leave. She was given just a few minutes or someone else would take her place. When she got back to her room, many of her possessions were piled against the wall from the steep incline of the sinking ship. Above her bed was a jewelry box of expensive diamond rings and necklaces. She brushed them aside and quickly grabbed two oranges and one apple. Our priorities change when life is at its most challenging. But ought they to be what they are at

present in our lives? It ought not to take a life-threatening crisis to make us realise what is the most important in our lives. How does Habakkuk respond to this situation?

## 2. Our Salvation is Secure (Habakkuk 3:18)

*...yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour* (Habakkuk 3:18). The problems that Habakkuk was deeply distressed about in chapter one of his little book have not gone away. The explanation of God how He was going to deal with the sins of His people provided no encouragement for someone wanting to live in a black and white world where the good people receive only good things and the bad people bad; the real world is an incredibly complex place where blessing and trials too often bear little relation to the lifestyle of the one that experiences them –at the human level. The perspective we have is like looking at a beautiful rug only from the other side with all its knots and interwoven threads. One day we will see the world from the other side and, only then will some things make sense that may never be understood in this life. (a) **Habakkuk is now in a new place in himself** through his prayers and time of wrestling with God. In this place he has been changed by his prayers not the outward circumstances. Of course there are many occasions where at the human level we can say that through prayer particular circumstances have been changed, but we need also to grasp that we ourselves can be changed through our prayers. This is clearly what has taken place here. (b) **Habakkuk is living firmly in the real world** one of the strengths of the Old Testament prophets was that they were well aware of what was happening around them. They did not ignore the very real problems their nation or other countries needed to address. In the world today with our personal entertainment systems, or even without any technological distractions, there is the opportunity to withdraw into our own personal space and pretend not to notice what is happening to other people. Churches where members only have friends in the church and never have any social contact with people outside the faith and rarely ever invite someone yet to come to faith to a church-related event can lose a sense of perspective concerning the culture around them, as much of the media and entertainment industry appears to have little comprehension today of what it means to be a Christian and the fact that our faith relates to the whole of life throughout the week, not just something we take out for a few hours in our private time on a Sunday. These things happen only gradually and those individuals or organisations most seriously affected can be completely unaware of the problem. (c) **Habakkuk embraces God's revealed will** he could so easily have resigned himself to it. I have no choice God is God so what does it matter how I feel about things. He has come to a place of deeper trust in the Lord. He does not ignore the real human issues or the actual evil around him –that could never be done with integrity. However, he has come to terms with the fact that he will never see the fuller picture that God sees, in this life, and therefore, must accept that God who sees the end from the beginning has a better perspective on the wider picture. In a sense in very simplistic terms a person viewing Ben Nevis and the surrounding area from the first vantage point maybe thirty minutes walk from the Youth Hostel in the valley below and another looking around from the summit. What can be seen from the two places is significantly different. He has come to a place of contentment in his circumstances. The apostle Paul also came in his later years to grasp this truth also, in Philippians 4:10-13: *I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. <sup>12</sup> I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. <sup>13</sup> I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.* It may be no accident that it is often only in later years that many Christians come to this place. I have certainly struggled with this issue and wanted to know

how God was going to work through some issues or situations that I or other people were facing and not wanted to be patient and wait to see how He would work them out. It is, though a further step to consciously do what Habakkuk has done in verse 18: *...yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour* (Habakkuk 3:18). In view of the imminent invasion of the Babylonians which could and most probably would result in the destruction of his nation the future looks bleak, but yet God has a purpose that He might never grasp to bring about something for the ultimate good of His people. Habakkuk not only foresees the *possibility* that he could lose everything; he foresees the *certainty* that the world as he knows it – along with everything and everyone he loves, probably will be destroyed. And in this extremity he says not only, I won't accuse God of being unfaithful, *I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour* (Habakkuk 3:18). How can he say this? Over the years there have been both religious and secular examples of people who have risen above their circumstances to the amazement of people around them. In the secular world the conduct of Nelson Mandela in South Africa in taking his country forward in the post-apartheid era has been inspirational. Seeing him wearing the Springboks' jersey in the Rugby Union World Cup final in South Africa on 24 June 1995 –was an extraordinary (and right) step to take. The Lord can enable us to do that which at the merely human level is beyond our natural abilities in the power of His Spirit. It is to this point that the prophet turns in the last verse of his message.

### 3. Our Strength comes from God (Habakkuk 3:19)

<sup>19</sup> *The Sovereign Lord is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, He enables me to tread on the heights* (Habakkuk 3:19). This verse explains why Habakkuk can rejoice in the midst of the terrible suffering he foresees. Consider three questions that arise as we try to understand what he is saying: Why does he say his feet are made like those of a deer? What is implied by *on the heights*? And what does he mean by *He enables me to go*?

(a) **He made made my feet like the feet of a deer** American pastor Coty Pinckney some years ago illustrated this point from the experience he and his wife Beth had in 1979. He wrote: If Habakkuk had lived on this continent, he might have said, "like those of a bighorn sheep." In 1979, Beth and I hiked for a week in Montana's Glacier National Park. Frequently we would look up at a rocky, seemingly inaccessible peak – and there near the top we would see bighorn sheep. They would climb to the uppermost crags, and run over rock fields as easily as we would run on the beach. Why are bighorn sheep able to do this? Because of their feet – their tough, cloven hooves. These hooves aren't hurt by sharp rocks, but are able to grip even small outcrops. God designed their feet for climbing. They don't slip. They don't fall. Note that the point is not the *power* of the sheep, but the design of the sheep's foot. Habakkuk uses the word for the female deer, not the male, to make this point. The female deer too is able to climb to the highest heights, to run over rocky fields, because of her special feet. So Habakkuk rejoices that his feet are made like deer's feet, like the feet of bighorn sheep – designed by God to travel over the most difficult ground. In other words though I may not realize it He has given me the spiritual resources to stand in my time of trial. It may be facing serious illness or a major operation; it can be a whole host of different trials and tests, but whatever it may be God will provide for my need.

(b) **On the heights** We must not interpret this phrase in the manner that would be natural in the Western world in the last couple of centuries. For many of us scenes readily come to mind of walking in the hills on a beautiful warm day with a gentle breeze. This is especially true for the keen mountaineers amongst us, but for everyone it can sound a rather enjoyable time and engaging in exercise that profits our bodies results in a double bonus, as our general fitness and sense of wellbeing may also benefit. However, until the last four or five generations the idea of exercising for pleasure, let alone day trips or holidays, was completely outside their experience. A very wealthy few could engage in non-essential trips but ordinary people could not even entertain any notions of such luxury. Mountain-climbing as we know it began in the nineteenth century. Habakkuk is thinking here of places or experiences that we

find very difficult, where we would not go unless it is absolutely necessary. So ‘the heights’ or ‘high places’, depending on the English translation, is describing circumstances through which we are allowed to pass by the Lord. For many of us it is major health situations personally or in our families, and ultimately death; it can be very hard times at work or struggles in human relationships. In essence, the situations we wouldn’t wish on ourselves or other people, yet which we know are part and parcel of the human condition. Recently one of my younger colleagues was diagnosed with Huntingdon’s Disease, an increasingly debilitating condition for which there is no cure; another in his twenties a few years ago was diagnosed with a brain tumour, though remarkably his treatment appears to be working and he was even at the June 2012 Ministers’ Conference, but the cancer, humanly-speaking, will not go away, but it was humbling to hear him so full of joy in the Lord.

In 2001 in the year of the foot and mouth outbreak that began apparently on pig farms in Northumberland the sad sight of pyres of burning carcasses was an increasingly familiar sight in rural England. I remember a few trips around that time down the M74 as the pyres were burning a strange and disturbing sight as the animal life was extinguished in a given area. Coming from a country farming background I was well aware that this is not a job but a way of life for many farmers. The slaughter of precious lines of animals that have lived with generations of farming families for some was traumatic. Newspapers predictably sought ought stories of lambs or calves or other farm animals being hidden from inspectors in farm houses. What made matters worse was the arbitrary policy of the government. The decisions about exclusion zones for slaughter varied from week to week and appeared to bear little relation to the advice given by the specialist vets in each region. Rural communities lived in fear for months on end that the plague would visit their community. In a valley I know well the dreaded news of slaughter finally came. One of the worse aspects to it was the total silence that followed for days as all the living creatures had been eliminated for several square miles. In that context most of the families were Christians and associated with a nearby Methodist Church where, after the slaughter, they gathered to meet in God’s house to respond to the situation. The passage of Scripture chosen for that service was Habakkuk 3:17-19: *Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the sheepfold and no cattle in the stalls,<sup>18</sup> yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; He enables me to tread on the heights.* Apparently it was an incredibly emotional gathering but the living Word of God was very real and relevant to that situation.

(c) ***He enables me to go*** The NIV translates this, “enables me to go on the heights.” Most English translations use two verbs here: the New King James, for example, “make” and “walk”, the NIV, “enable” and “go”. But in Hebrew, there is only one verb, the usual verb for “walk”, with a stem change that indicates the subject is caused to do the normal action of the verb. So in this case, the phrase might mean: “He leads me to these high places; He makes me go there even though I don’t want to.” Or, it might mean (as the NIV interprets it): “He enables me to walk on places I could not go without his help.” [Coty Pinckney comment] It appears likely that Habakkuk includes both of these ideas. He is fearful of what God may allow to cross his pathway as he is unsure of how he would cope under such a trial because it would be so hard and in his case dangerous as well. He has also come to terms with the fact that God is leading him to a place he does not want to go. Yet, at the same time he willingly affirms that God is his strength, and Habakkuk is confident that God will enable him to do what he could never do on his own. And that is why he is joyful! God led him to this very spot. And though there is pain and difficulty here, he knows that God will either rescue him from the danger or allow him to die. But even death is controlled by God, and only will come about if God so directs. Therefore, he will affirm *The Sovereign Lord is my strength* (Habakkuk 3:19). As a result because God is good and all-knowing and is in control of His world I will rejoice in the assurance that though I cannot see the way ahead I will place

my life securely in the hands of the One who does. Is this something you and I need to grasp afresh today?

Therefore, in our schools, colleges or universities and workplaces or in retirement, where the Lord has placed us, we can stand in the midst of our trials, although we readily acknowledge that walking by faith (Habakkuk 2:4b) can be much harder than walking by sight. It is often natural to seek to take care of our life circumstances and 'be in control' – whatever that means. Yet our satisfaction and fulfillment in life and our security are only ultimately found in the Lord. It is natural to seek the affirmation and honour of colleagues, friends and family –and it is right and good to mark achievements people have accomplished. Yet how arbitrary is such honour; how many great painters, musicians or inventors, for example, were only accorded greatness after their deaths? How many authors book sales or singer's record sales only seriously took off after their deaths? Only the Lord will consistently honour fairly and appropriately those whose words and actions are truly deserving of recognition in the big scheme of things. To the one who lives by faith, God says, "Don't pursue these things directly! You will not find them that way. I know, that's the natural thing to do. But I tell you: Trust in Me! Delight in Me! And I will give you the desires of your heart. You will find true satisfaction, true security, true accomplishment, and true honor in Me alone!" The message of Habakkuk also teaches us that living by faith means loving God rather than loving the things He allows us to possess. Theoretically you could purchase a bundle of love-letters expressing endless devotion in an auction sale. If the author and recipient were unknown how meaningful would they be? If they had belonged to your parents or grandparents or even you or your spouse it would be another story. The significance is purely down to the personal element in the particular case. It is easy for us to delight in the gifts and blessings God grants us and to become angry or disillusioned if they are taken away. It takes more effort to love the Lord for who He is than when He has blessed us with all kind of material or other this-life related blessings. Habakkuk challenges us to declare that God is our delight, our portion and our treasure, and that we desire nothing compared with Him. Whatever your high places might be, know that God has either allowed us to be there or guided us there. In that place He will enable you to endure, He will enable you to rejoice for Jesus' sake, Amen.