

3. The Silent Earth

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Date: 24 January 2007

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[0 : 00] Now this is our third week on the prophet Habakkuk and we're coming today to chapter 2, reading verses 2 to 20 on page 785.

The prophet has already chided with God about the state of the world, about the violence, the chaos and so on. God's already answered him and the prophet continues to ask questions but we come today to the Lord's second answer.

So chapter 2 verse 2. And the Lord answered me, write the vision, make it plain on tablets so he may run who reads it.

For still the vision awaits its appointed time, it hastens to the end, it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not delay.

Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith.

Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest.

[1 : 09] His greed is as wide as sheol, like death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples. Shall not all these take up their taunt against him with scoffing and riddles for him and say, Woe to him who heaps up what is not his own.

For how long? And loads himself with pledges. Will not your debtor suddenly arise and those who awake will make you tremble? Then you will be spoil for them.

Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the people shall plunder you. For the blood of man and the violence to the earth, to cities and all who dwell in them.

Woe to him who gets evil gain for his house, to set his nest on high, to be safe from the reach of harm. You have devised shame for your house.

By cutting off many peoples, you have forfeited your life. For the stone will cry out from the wall, and the beam from the woodwork respond. Woe to him who builds a town with blood, and founds a city on iniquity.

[2 : 18] Behold, it is not from the Lord of hosts that people labour merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing. For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

Woe to him who makes his neighbours drink. You pour out your wrath, and make them drunk, in order to gaze at their nakedness. You will have your fill of shame instead of glory.

Drink yourself, and show your uncircumcision. The cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory. The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you, as will the destruction of the beasts that terrified them, for the blood of man, and violence to the earth, to cities, and all who dwell in them.

What profit is an idol, when its maker has shaped it? A metal image, a teacher of lies. For its maker trusts in his own creation, when he made speechless idols.

Woe to him, who says to a wooden thing, Awake! To a silent stone, Arise! Can this teach? Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, and there is no breath at all in it.

[3 : 37] But the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him. Amen. That is God's word to us.

And let's pray now, that God will teach us, what he is, what he said through his prophets. Let's pray. And God our Father, how we praise you, that you are not like the pagan gods, the inventions of humans, which cannot speak, cannot see, cannot hear, and cannot act.

You are the living God, the one who has spoken, spoken through your prophets, and uniquely in Jesus Christ, and today, in that written word, which so fully and faithfully leads us to him.

So guide our thoughts today. Guide my words, so that they will faithfully unfold your word. And touch our hearts and our minds. Cause us, as the Lord Jesus Christ did to his disciples, cause us to

have hearts, that will burn within us, and cause us to have minds, that will be enlightened, and send us back out, into the world, with the message, that there is a living God.

That he has a purpose, and that purpose will be fulfilled. We ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Many of you will, I'm sure, read and appreciate the Narnia stories.

[5 : 05] Many of you will have seen the films, perhaps not so many of you, know C.S. Lewis's science fiction. Perhaps you do. And one of them is called, Out of the Silent Planet.

And the silent planet, is our own earth. And it's silent, because it's cut itself off, by turning its back on the creator, by turning its back on the living God, and listening instead, to the prince of the world, the devil himself.

In many senses, the world that Habakkuk presents, is a silent world. It's full of noise, it's full of violence, and yet, it is silent, because it's not listening, to the voice of God.

Which indeed, is the point of the last verse we read. The Lord, is in his holy temple. Let all the earth, keep silent, before him. Remember, Habakkuk, has asked God questions.

Why are the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, this great superpower, why are they being allowed, to fill the earth, with violence, and bloodshed? Why is such a wicked nation, indeed, going to destroy, and take away, into their capital city, God's own people?

[6 : 14] Why is it, that God is doing nothing? And God has said, well actually, I am doing something, and what I'm doing, is the very thing, you're complaining about. I raised up, these people, and I raised them up, so that I could show my purpose.

And now he comes, to his second answer. He's standing, as it were, on the watchtower. He's taking a wide view, a panoramic view, kind of eagle's eye view, so to speak, over the whole landscape.

And the Lord gives his second answer. And the Lord is really talking here, about two ways, of living in the world. Two ways, of looking at the world.

And the first, is the way of faith, in verse two, and following. But how are we going, to live by faith? What is there, what is it, that's going to sustain us? And first of all, the Lord says to Habakkuk, I'm going to give you, a word, which is not just going, to be for your generation, but for every generation.

[7 : 16] Verse two, write the vision, make it plain on tablets. In other words, this message, that Habakkuk gives, is going to be relevant, now, in 2007, as much as it was, around, around the 600 BC.

This is going to be, a message, on tablets. Ironically, the Babylonians, the Chaldeans, wrote on stone tablets. That's why, that's why we know, so much about, their civilization.

Because when the city, and the empire, was destroyed, these tablets, were simply hardened, by the fire. The Lord is saying, I've got a message, and it's going to outlast, the Babylonians.

God is speaking, by his spirit, speaking to our hearts, again. But the second thing, about that message is, it's going to be taken, into the world.

You don't have to tell people, about it. The Lord answered me, write the vision, make it so he may run, who reads it. Or as the New International Version says, so that a herald, so that a messenger, may take it.

[8 : 17] How are we going to be faithful, to the unchanging word of God? We're not going to be faithful, by putting it in a museum, putting it in a stained glass case, saying, this is the Bible, this is the truth, unchanged, unchanging, which it is.

We're going to be faithful to it, by taking it out, into the world, proclaiming it anew, to every generation. See, when we try, simply to preserve, the language, the idioms, the style, of a previous age, then we lose, the message, because the message, is a living message.

I was born, and brought up, in Fife, in the village of St. Monance, which used to be called, when I was a boy, the Holy City, not because of the sanctity, of its inhabitants, but because, for a village, of 1500 souls, it had 10 churches, different varieties, of the Brethren, Church of Scotland, Salvation Army, oh goodness me, any kind of, theological grouping, that could dot, their theological I's, and cross, their theological T's.

Now the point, about that was, that in an earlier generation, in my grandfather's generation, my grandfather, was a young man, back in the early years, of the 20th century.

He, and many others, of his generation, had been brought to Christ, by the ministry, of a fisherman, turned evangelist, Jock Troop, who preached up, and down the east coast, the fishing ports, right up to the, the northeast, and right down to Grimsby, and Lowestoft, and Yarmouth.

[9 : 45] And a great work of God, was done. And as a result of this, these communities, were founded, they were godly communities. Trouble is, by the time I was a boy, they had ossified, still singing the same old hymns, still, say, chanting the same old mantras.

In one sense, they had been faithful, in another sense, they hadn't run with the message. It was stuck in the past. The message, the unchanging message, the gospel is non-negotiable. There is no way, to change the message, we have no right to do so, but we have to run with it. We have to take it, tell the world about it. And the other thing, about this message, is that it points forward, to the future.

Verse 3, the vision awaits, its appointed time, it hastens to the end, it will not lie. Now this word, the end, when you come across it, in the prophets, it first of all means, the end of the situation. In other words, this message, will be around, after the exile is over, when the people of God return. This will be the message, that will still be being proclaimed.

[10 : 54] But it points far beyond that, it points to the end, of all things, the coming of Christ, and the setting up, of his kingdom. See what Habakkuk is saying, Habakkuk is saying, or rather, the Lord is saying to Habakkuk, the message I give you, will last, until the kingdom comes.

It will never be irrelevant. I used to be told, when I studied theology, that prophets, were not foretellers, they were foretellers. In other words, they simply spoke, into the language, of their time. Now of course, they did that. They spoke to their, contemporary, they had a message, for the people of the time. But the point surely is, that if that were all they did, then they'd only be, historical interest.

It'd be a curiosity, of the past. The point is, since they spoke, about the end, the day when the earth, will be filled, with the knowledge, of the glory of the Lord, as the waters, cover the sea.

They had a message, for every day. They are both, foretellers, and foretellers. There is the way, of faith. Verse 4, the righteous, shall live, by his faith. Perhaps by the faithfulness, of God, although we shouldn't, make too much of that, because faith, is a response, to the faithfulness, of God.

[12 : 05] This is the way, of faith, which is the way, of vision. Seeing things, from God's perspective. But there is another way. Verse, the beginning of verse 4, behold, his soul, is puffed up.

The soul, of the Babylonian, the Chaldean, those who, back in verse, in chapter 1, verse 11, guilty men, whose own might, is their God.

People who trust, in themselves. This is the way, of the world. The way, of looking, only at the visible world, not looking, beyond it, to God. And there are, many woes.

Over, four times, in the passage, five times, I think the word, woe, is said. Verse 6, woe to him, who heaps up, what is not his own. Verse 9, woe to him, who gets evil gain.

Verse 12, woe to him, who builds a town, with blood. Verse 15, woe to him, who makes his neighbours drunk. Verse 19, woe to him, who says to a wooden thing, awake.

[13 : 03] Now, woe, is not just saying, I disapprove of it. Woe, is the opposite, of blessed. When God calls, something, or someone, blessed, he means, that they have his favour, to all eternity.

It's a word, that looks to the future. That's why, I'm never very happy, when it's translated, happy. Because happy, is a feeling, which comes and goes.

Blessed is something, God says about you, even if you're feeling, miserable. Even if you're a melancholy, misery guts. You can still be blessed, if God says, you are blessed.

Happiness is a feeling. Now, woe, similarly, that is God, pronouncing his condemnation. You may get away with it now, but you won't get away with it then.

He, and what does the Lord condemn? He condemns, he condemns greed and exploitation. Verse 6, woe to him who heaps up, what is not his own.

[14 : 03] There will be judgment, even in this world. Verse 5, woe your debtors, does not suddenly arise, but the judgment will finally come. Even if you get away with it in this world, you won't get away with it in that one.

Tells that he condemns, he condemns exploitation. Verse 9, woe to him who gets evil gain for his house. Verse 11, the stone will cry out from the wall. Unscrupulous landlords, perhaps, who sell substandard property to the young and the vulnerable.

That's the kind of thing that Habakkuk, I call him Habakkuk. I'm never sure what I'm going to call him until the words actually come out of my mouth. Then he condemns violence.

Verse 12, woe to him who builds a town with blood and finds a city on iniquity. Exactly what Babylon was doing, exactly what Nineveh had done in the past, and exactly what had happened sometimes in Jerusalem in the reign of some of the worst kings.

Verse 15, woe, he's talking about debauchery, woe to him who makes his neighbours drink. You pour out your wrath and make them drunk in order to gaze at their nakedness.

[15:15] The exploiting once again, particularly the young and the vulnerable, by the rich and the powerful. All you need to do is look at the tabloid press to see how much of that is done in our society.

But, instantly, many people here are probably thinking, I don't exploit people. I'm not founding a town by violence. I don't lead people into debauchery.

I don't get evil gain from my house. Well, maybe not. And that's why he goes on in verse 18 to a subject that seems to be totally irrelevant.

What prophet is an idol? And you see what Habakkuk is saying. Habakkuk is saying, you may not be an exploiter. You may not be a loan shark. You may not be a drug baron.

You may be none of those things. But here's something we're all in danger of. Idolatry. In other words, you see how this fits together? Habakkuk is saying, look at the real world.

[16:15] See everything in the light of God and his word. Don't believe in idols. Now, what's the trouble with idolatry?

I want to suggest there are two problems with idolatry. One is, idolatry opens the door to unreality. An awful lot of that in our society, isn't there?

I sometimes think if some of our television commercials were put in a time capsule and preserved for centuries, those who found them would think we were the most gullible race of people who had ever lived on the face of the earth.

All those smart cars, all those beautiful people, all those perfumes, all those aftershaves, and the suggestion that these will introduce you into a glittering lifestyle. That is idolatry.

It's shown in what we call, incredibly, reality television. I wonder if anyone told George Orwell he got it wrong.

[17:14] Big Brother is not watching us. We're watching him in our millions. More people watch Big Brother, apparently, than voted in the 2005 general election.

This shows how real a threat idolatry is. It opens the door to unreality. We live in a world which is not governed by the word of God, a world where our eyes are closed.

That's why Habakkuk uses so much about vision, about insight. But secondly, and more seriously, idolatry opens the door to Satan, to the devil himself.

See, if you see, an idol is nothing, so it can't really help me. But anywhere where people start worshipping idols, start believing in unreal things, then Satan is always there to exploit it.

That's what Paul says in 1 Corinthians, an idol is nothing at all. And then he says the danger is when people when people worship nothing at all, they're actually worshipping demons.

[18:16] So, when we engage in idolatry, we're worshipping something less than ourselves. When the Old Testament condemns idolatry, it doesn't so much condemn it for its wickedness, but for its silliness.

What's the, woe to him who says to a wooden thing, awake. Imagine worshipping this lectern and expecting to come to this lectern for guidance. Imagine, imagine worshipping a table or a chair.

That's what idolatry is. And that's essentially what paganism was about. These gods were human inventions. Israel's God was different.

My help, says the psalmist, is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. So, what's the antidote to idolatry then? I'll finish on this.

There are two significant verses here. First one in verse 14, where even in the middle of this glimpse of an unreal world, a world of violence, a world of bloodshed, Habakkuk says, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

[19:27] Wonderful phrase, the waters are the sea, after all. But surely the prophet is saying, the sense of the presence of God will be so powerful, so real, so obvious, that no one will be able to deny it.

And this word glory is a fascinating word. The glory of God means the utter reality of God. the word it comes from is a verb which means to be solid, to be heavy.

God is utterly real. The opposite is what Ecclesiastes talks about the Hebrew word hevel, which means vanity, futility. If we don't take God into the equation, we are living in a fantasy world. But if we believe in God, we are living in the real world. As the waters, the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. And notice once again, it's both an experience, the glory of the Lord.

But also, it's something to be taught. Once again, he who runs, he who reads it may run with it. And then the last verse, the Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him.

[20 : 34] His holy temple means more than one thing. It means the temple in Jerusalem, where perhaps Habakkuk was as he spoke this.

But it also means the whole of heaven and earth. The whole of the universe is God's temple. It belongs to him. And when God is in his holy temple, there is only one thing we can do, and that is listen to him.

Let all the earth keep silent before him. Next week, we are going to see how Habakkuk, as he waits silently before the Lord, is given a message that addresses these great concerns.

As we finish, I want you to realise, first of all, that God does not say that Habakkuk's questions are wrong. God always responds to honest questioning.

God always responds to cries of pain. But secondly, God always responds by giving himself in his word.

[21 : 36] God responds by showing his glory, his utter reality, and giving to us a message that will lead us out of fantasy land and lead us into reality until one day that reality becomes unmistakable, that day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Let's pray. And God, our Father, how we praise you that you give us your word taken by your spirit to open our eyes to your glory to lead us away from unreality.

As we return to our work, as we return to all the problems, the joys, and the sorrows from which we have come, we pray that we will go with this great reassurance that in the middle of chaos you are with us, that one day you will lead us beyond it so the time from the whole earth will be filled with your glory.

We praise you for this, we praise you for your word, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thank you very much and remember once again the books and the CDs and so on.

are you fine?

[23 : 24] Thank you.