

Habakkuk 1-2:1

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Date: 27 May 2018

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[0 : 00] Well, let's turn in our Bibles to Habakkuk chapter 1 again. John McEnroe is one of the greatest players to pick up a tennis racket. Today he's known for his commentary, and when Wimbledon comes around, you may be looking forward to it as I am, his insights are often incisive. He's someone the players respect. But things were often, or once rather, a little bit different. When he first appeared on centre court, he ruffled a few feathers.

The crowd loved to hate him, and it often went something like this. McEnroe would fire a forehand past his opponent, the line judge would cry out, Hawkeye was not invented, so McEnroe would turn and give a deaf stare to the umpire. He'd walk to his chair, he'd shake his head, the crowd would be on tenterhooks, and McEnroe would plead with the umpire, I won't do the accent, you cannot be serious.

That ball was on the line. You cannot be serious. Well, reading Habakkuk is a little bit like being in the crowd at Wimbledon when McEnroe is confronting the umpire. To open up this book is to listen in on an intensely emotional conversation between Habakkuk and the Lord.

The on-court mic has been turned up, and we're on the edge of our seats waiting to hear what's next. Commentators point out that his name means embrace or wrestle. And so, throughout this very personal prayer journal, it's exactly what he's doing. He's very like Jacob, wrestling with God, with who he is, with what he does. He's a protester. God is in the dock, and Habakkuk has got questions for him.

We're going to listen in today, and this morning I've got three headings to guide us through. Notice first verses 1 to 4, the silence, the faithful here. The silence, the faithful here.

[2 : 33] How long, Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen. Or cry out violence, but you do not save. This book begins with a cry from the heart. It's incredibly raw. Habakkuk has got big problems with God. He's deeply unhappy. He's very confused. Before we look at what he says, just notice that he's clearly prayed for quite some time. How long, Lord? How long? In other words, he's not a skeptic, pondering, theoretical questions about evil and suffering. No, Habakkuk is a real believer.

He's wrestling with how to live a life of faith in a fearful world. He lives in a broken society. There's so much wrong, and he feels like God is powerless or just doesn't care. Do you see verse 3? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me. There is strife and conflict abounds. Habakkuk doubts that God hears. He doubts God can act, and he feels like God is just rubbing his nose in it. I wonder, have you ever been there? Maybe you're right there today. You're not listening. You're just not listening. When did you last say that to somebody?

Have you ever said it to God? It's exactly how Habakkuk feels. God is a world of conscience. He takes on the role of conscience of the nation. Notice verse 4.

The law is paralyzed. It's a world where judges take bribes and police turn a blind eye. It's a world where believers are persecuted and nobody cares. It's our world. There's no consequences, no justice, no meaning, and God seems completely indifferent. How long, O Lord?

[4 : 58] I don't think anyone has captured this better than C.S. Lewis in his book, *A Grief Observed*. In an earlier book called *The Problem of Pain*, he analyzed suffering from the outside. He looked at all the intellectual arguments for faith, but *A Grief Observed*, a very short but powerful book. It is different. There he talks about suffering from the inside, what it feels like to suffer.

It was written after the death of his wife, Joy. It was initially anonymous, but he had very good friends who quickly realized that he was the author. Just listen to what he writes.

When you're happy, so happy you have no sense of needing God, so happy you're tempted to feel his claims upon you as an interruption, then if you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you feel welcomed by him with open arms. But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. And after that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the windows. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited? It seemed so once. And that seeming was as strong as this. What can this mean?

Why is he so present a commander in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble? Isn't that so true to life? Believers often feel exactly like that. They often hear, don't they, God's silence at the exact moment they long to hear his voice. They cry to God, and he seems to do nothing. And the book of Psalms reflects this, doesn't it? So many are cries from the gut, songs from the muck. Psalm 13, which we sang, how long, O Lord, will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts, and every day have sorrow in my heart? Why are words like that in the Bible?

[7 : 53] Why are prayers like Habakkuk's here? Why are prayers like that in the Bible? How long will you feel like this?

Even as he laments, Habakkuk is teaching us how to pray. He doesn't just complain about God. No, he brings his complaint directly to him.

Some of us may have heard the acronym ACTS and maybe used it in our personal prayers. A is for adoration, praising God for who he is. C is for confession, saying sorry to God for what we've done. T is for thanksgiving. S is for supplication, a very fancy word for basically asking for things, acts. It can be a very good tool. I was taught it at university. I've often thought about it, often used it.

But as Dale Ralph Davis points out, sometimes life isn't that tidy. Sometimes you need to have a good old whale to your God. Have you ever done that?

It is not incompatible with being a believer. Sometimes life is so hard, even as a Christian, that you just need to bring all your burdens and mess to your Father and ask Him to sort it all out.

[9 : 53] Have you ever prayed like this? I can't handle this. I can't handle it. I can't do this.

I don't understand. I need you to fix this. You can pray like that as a Christian. And God might not answer straight away, but He can take it.

He can handle what someone has called your uncensored prayers. Your uncensored prayers.

That's the silence. The faithful hear. Notice secondly, though, the shock the faithful get. Verses 5 to 11.

The shock the faithful get. In verse 5, God finally answers Habakkuk. Look at the nations and watch. Be utterly amazed.

[10 : 56] I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. God has heard his cry. God is going to judge. But then God delivers a terrible blow.

I am raising up the Babylonians. With that little phrase, God shatters all of Habakkuk's categories. His solution seems worse than the problem itself. I am raising up the Babylonians. Now, a friend of mine says, when you hear the name Babylonians, think orcs.

Remember Lord of the Rings? Brutal. Savage. Out of control. Just scan the verses to see how they're described. They're dreaded.

With horses swifter than leopards. They're like wolves. Like eagles. They devour. They gather up prisoners like a child putting sand in her bucket.

[11 : 57] They're in control. They scoff at kings. They mock all opponents. They're as quick as the wind. Untameable. Unstoppable. Uncontrollable. And then the summary, verse 11.

Guilty people whose own strength is their God. It's remarkable. Judgment was coming through a bunch of idolaters.

God's people were about to be humbled, taken into exile by the mob. The mob. God seems like a surgeon with a dirty scalpel.

Or a grotty needle to stitch up a wound. How could He possibly behave like this? And notice, He is not just going to let this happen. He's not passive.

He's not just turning a blind eye. No, He's raising them up. For a purpose. You know, this is so often the way God chooses to work.

[12 : 59] He doesn't behave the way we expect. He moves in a mysterious way. Just think of Joseph.

This is all through the Bible. God putting His servant in a pit. And then in prison. Before raising him up to deliver His people. You meant it for evil.

God meant it for good. Think of Samson. God using an extremely unsavory character to judge and save.

Above all, think of the cross. God using hatred and nails to redeem us. God using ATHQ to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. They did what your power and your will had decided beforehand should happen. Evil men with evil plans, but they're doing God's bidding.

They're doing God's bidding. And so Habakkuk teaches us God is always gloriously free to act as He wills. He won't be boxed in. He does as He pleases. History is in His hands.

[14 : 51] I think this is so important for believers to remember. We tend to think it is only when the sun is shining like today, that God's providence is at work. But God is sovereign in dark days too.

Not only that, Habakkuk teaches that sometimes believers will pray and things will get a lot worse before they get any better. Do you know that?

Have you experienced that? You have a problem, you cry to God, and it all just gets harder. You know, I think sometimes as Christians, we just need permission to say that life can be like that. We just need permission to say that life can be like that. If you're a new Christian, if you're thinking through Christianity, you need to know that God will sometimes answer your prayers in a way that you would never, ever have chosen.

And Habakkuk teaches us that God works always on a far greater scale than we could imagine. someone put it like this, when God is doing one thing, He's doing a thousand things.

When God is doing one thing, He's doing a thousand things. Does your life feel like a mess just now? Will you trust Him?

[16 : 44] To mark the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, a 38-meter mosaic was created. It showed the Queen at the start of her reign and in her 60th year on the throne. The mosaic was made up of about 5,000 photos taken by members of the public. And together they formed a wonderful collage. Some were of ordinary people who had died in her reign. Some were celebrities. Imagine if you had sent in a photo, a photo of yourself. You'd want to find it, wouldn't you? Your nose would be pressed up against that picture.

But you couldn't really stay there, could you? Eventually you'd have to step back and look at the whole. It's a bit like life with God. He is a great artist. He uses all kinds of things to make something beautiful, to achieve His ends. And He can use all your difficulties, all your despair, all your disappointments, and even the delays.

He can use the worst things in life and fit it into His plan. None of it, absolutely none of it is ever beyond His redemption. None of it outside His control. That's how wonderful, how different, how glorious, how able He is.

The silence the faithful hear, the shock the faithful get. Notice finally the sovereign, the faithful trust. The sovereign, the faithful trust.

Here we're looking at verse 12 to chapter 2, verse 1. And in these verses, Habakkuk responds to the Lord's answer. Mark Dever, a minister in America, compares him to a perplexed journalist at a White House press conference. He's just asked a question, is bemused by the response, Mr. President, can I ask a follow-up? Habakkuk is stunned by what he's heard.

[19 : 11] And we could sum verses 12 to 17 up with two words, the Babylonians. The Babylonians. Habakkuk can't take it in. He's so confused. Just look at what he does in response. He piles up titles to describe the Lord, his God. He is the Lord, the covenant God from everlasting, the Holy One, the Rock. And yet, he has appointed the Babylonians to execute judgment. It makes no sense.

Here's how one translator puts it. Oh God, you're from eternity, aren't you? Holy God, we aren't going to die, are we? God, you choose the Babylonians for your judgment work.

You gave them the job of discipline, but you can't be serious. It's almost as if Habakkuk thinks God's theology is unsound. His behavior is unorthodox. Has God forgotten who he is? He's a bit like Peter confronting Christ when he spoke of the cross. Surely not.

Do you see verse 13? Don't you remember, Lord? Your eyes are too pure to look on evil. Just look at the imagery he uses to describe the Babylonians. It's a repeat of verses 6 to 11.

They're like a fisherman who plunges his net into the sea. Verse 14. He takes his fill. He starts again. He gathers up foes and no one can stop him.

[21 : 01] He lives in luxury. He glories in his success. He's full of pride. Lord, is this really the kind of person you should be associating with? I think, you know, Habakkuk teaches us something very important about the life of faith here. To belong to God doesn't mean we have no doubts or questions. Absolutely not.

Sometimes we can give the impression, can't we, that the Christian life is only for people who have everything figured out like Hermione and Harry Potter or the kids with the textbook under the desk. No. Habakkuk is a man full of questions, but he brings them straight to the Lord. That's what true faith does.

True faith clings to God even when it is perplexed by God. Do you remember the man in Mark 9? I believe, help my unbelief. I believe, help my unbelief. Maybe that's you today.

You feel like God's let you down. You don't understand what he's doing. Will you continue to trust him? Will you bring your questions to him? Will you follow Habakkuk's example?

[22 : 42] Just look at his posture in chapter 2 verse 1. I will stand at my watch. I will station myself on the ramparts.

This is interesting. I will look to see what he will say. Look to see what he will say to me. And what answer I am to give to this complaint.

The imagery of a watchman is often used in the Old Testament. Habakkuk is like a guard at the city gates and he scans the horizon. His ears are wide open. He waits to see what God will say. He's confused, but he's not lost his confidence. He believes God must know what he's doing.

And not only that, he seems to have an audience in mind. There's just a little hint of this at the end of verse 1. It's as if he knows one day he will recount this experience. He will tell other people what God has done.

God will answer. Habakkuk will share it. One day I'll look back. I'll give an answer concerning my complaint. There's a wonderful old hymn that captures the essence of this.

[24 : 09] Workmen of God, O lose not heart, but learn what God is like. Learn what God is like. And in the darkest battlefield, you shall know where to strike.

Thrice blessed, old language, thrice blessed is he to whom is given the instinct that can tell that God is on the field when he is most invisible.

Learn what God is like. Don't lose heart. God is on the field when he is most invisible.

Habakkuk had that instinct. One old theologian put it like this, God knows what he is about.

I love that. Five words, but they change everything. God knows what he is about. He is in control.

You know, sometimes we say that as Christians, it can sound like such a cliché, can't it?

[25 : 25] But someone really is on the throne of the universe. Just listen to Psalm 13 again.

Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death. My enemy will say I have overcome him. And my foes will rejoice when I fall, but I trust in your unfailing love.

You see, that is what real faith often feels like. Tired and weary, tearful, but trusting and just, just, just, just clinging on.

Just to God's promises. Even when I don't understand him, scanning the horizon, waiting, hoping, longing for future deliverance, waiting for God to answer.

Dunkirk is one of my favorite films, no surprise, of the past few years. It tells the story of British troops stranded on the beaches of Normandy in World War II.

[26 : 39] Backed into a corner with no chance of escape, all hope seemed to be lost. In one of the most moving scenes, Kenneth Branagh's character suddenly spots something on the horizon.

And as he picks up his binoculars, the camera, beautifully shot, stays focused on his face. And he breaks into a smile.

And tears start to well up in his eyes. What do you see? Asks the friend. And after a long pause, he simply says, Home.

A huge number of civilian boats are on their way. The cheers from the men are deafening. Rescue is on the way. Well, how much more with us?

We leave Habakkuk on a cliffhanger. Stay tuned for the second half tonight. But let me press the fast forward button.

[27 : 48] Because somebody else felt abandoned and broken. And Christ is the one who knows how Habakkuk feels.

We read this book through the lens of the cross. Calvary is the place to go to at the end of this passage. The cross is the place to come back to.
Again and again. When God's ways seem perplexing. Let it fill your gaze today. There is a God with an answer to evil.
A God who understands. We see more, don't we, than Habakkuk saw. We see our Savior in the garden praying.
And things getting worse. We see our Savior on a blood-stained cross. Despised. Rejected. Alone.
[28 : 57] As he went to that tree, he took on our curse. He was mocked. Darkness engulfed him. He cried out in pain. And what did he hear? The silence of heaven.
The silence of heaven. And he heard it for you. Let's pray.
Heavenly Father, we thank you for the raw honesty of your word. So true to life. And we thank you for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.
We bow before him. And we want to praise him and thank you for him now. In Jesus' name.
Amen. Amen.