

Habakkuk 2-3

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[0 : 0 0] Alistair Campbell was Tony Blair's press secretary in his first few years as PM. Two weeks, just two weeks after Blair resigned, Campbell published a diary, he must have been working on it, recounting the early days in number 10. Not surprisingly, the media lapped it up. The thoughts and decisions of an ex-prime minister were open for all to see, and a personal journal was now public property. It's a very similar thing to the book of Habakkuk. As we read, we're listening in to his dialogue with God, and it has been preserved for us in Scripture. A personal journal is public property. Habakkuk has been on a journey. This morning we saw him wrestling with God. In the face of suffering, it seemed like God had gone AWOL. When God finally spoke, it was surprising. He promised an arrogant enemy to judge his own people, and Habakkuk was astonished. We left him waiting to hear from God. But by chapter 3, Habakkuk is worshipping. By the end of this book, he's singing. Not only that, he wants to teach us to do the same. Just look at the beginning and end of chapter 3. Most translations have notes saying for the director of music or choir master.

Shigioneth and stringed instruments, they are terms for musicians, the 700 BC equivalent of Ian and the gang. So Habakkuk wants them to put his words to music. We'll think about why that matters later. But as we begin, just take that to heart. The truths Habakkuk has learned about God have been preserved for us.

They're good for us. They're here to make us sing. Habakkuk has moved from wrestling to worship, from protest to praise. How did he get there? How did he change? And how can we? Notice first, verses 2 to 5, the tension he felt. The tension he felt. Chapter 2, verses 2 to 5.

After the cliffhanger, God finally replies, write down the revelation, make it plain. God is about to give his answer to give his answer, and instructions are given. Habakkuk is to write on tablets, not the electronic kind that we're all addicted to. This points to the Ten Commandments.

There is a permanence to what he is going to hear, a priority to. This is a message to run with, verse 2, a message to be spread. In verses 4 to 5, God describes the Babylonians. He and Habakkuk finally seem to be singing from the same hymn sheet. The Babylonians are summed up in one figure.

[3 : 3 5] Just look how he's described, verses 4 to 5. Puffed up, greedy, like death, he is never satisfied. He gathers. He takes people captive. When I first read these verses, I couldn't help thinking, maybe it's just me, that I couldn't help thinking of Jabba the Hutt. Remember him in Star Wars? Kind of giant, greedy slug. Well, God is saying to Habakkuk, that is my assessment of the Babylonians. I know what they are like.

I know what they're like, Habakkuk. But jump back to verse 3. Here God points to a waiting period.

What God will go on to say in the rest of this chapter will not happen with a click of the fingers. No, the revelation awaits an appointed time. It speaks of the end and will not prove false, though it lingers. Wait for it. The righteous live by faith, verse 4.

But we do so, don't we, in a world where evil so often seems to triumph. And this is the friction of the Christian life.

This is what sometimes is called the now and the not yet of God's kingdom. And a failure to understand that can have massive implications for Christians.

[5 : 23] My old boss, I used to work for UCCF, and he used to say that our two main dangers are cynicism and triumphalism as Christians.

Cynicism and triumphalism. We have so much now as Christians. Forgiveness, real joy, a place in heaven. But we still live, don't we, with sin and difficulties. We still wait for what's to come.

God's Word keeps us from being cynical. There is victory ahead. But God's Word also keeps us from triumphalism. There is victory ahead.

We live by faith. We wait for God. While the devil prowls around and seems in charge, it's par for the course in the Christian life.

The Apostle Peter writes this, Above all, you must understand, in the last days, scoffers will come. They will say, where is this coming, he promised?

[6 : 30] But do not forget this one thing, dear friends. With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. True faith trusts and waits.

True faith holds on to God's promises with hope in Him. It sticks with Christ. And true faith knows God is never in a hurry.

God is never in a hurry. I wonder, is there room in your systematic theology for what we might call the slowness of God's ways? The slowness of God's ways.

He won't be rushed. The story is told of a man who went to a concert to hear some beautiful music. He sat right next to the orchestra pit.

And from his seat, he saw what few other people could see. He watched the conductor leading the musicians. And he noticed a small bowl on a table next to his music stand.

[7 : 36] From time to time, the conductor would pick up an M&M; and pop it in his mouth. He knew the music. He was perfectly calm.

He had a huge audience. He knew the music. But there was no need to panic or hurry. And some of us may need a reminder that God is like that.

He's still sovereign, even in the delays. He's still working his purposes out. Still in complete control. Even when evil seems to reign.

That's the tension Habakkuk felt. Notice secondly, though, the taunts that he heard. The taunts he heard.

This is verse 6 to verse 20. In these verses, God says the tables are going to be turned. From verse 6 to the end of the chapter, we're told of five woes that are coming the way of the Babylonians.

[8 : 41] Just look down. You can see them. Verse 6. Verse 9. Verse 12. Verse 15.

And verse 19. We don't have time to go into all the details. But five times God says, Whoa.

A storm is coming. The enemies of God's people will be crushed. God is saying, Don't think they'll get away with it, Habakkuk. I'm raising them up for my purpose.

But that does not mean that I've forgotten. I will bring even them to judgment. It will be a time for rejoicing. God's victory, my victory, says God, is certain.

I don't know about you, but I think sometimes talk like that can make us feel a little bit squeamish or uncomfortable.

[9 : 49] How does that fit with the idea of Christians loving our enemies? We'll come back to it in our final point. But first, just notice some of the details.

Look at what God says. In verse 6, He says that the plunderers will be plundered. All of a sudden, verse 7, the Babylonians will be the ones trembling.

In verse 9, those that thought they were above it all will come to ruin. God's victory is certain.

The Eagle's Nest was a mountaintop retreat presented to Adolf Hitler on his 50th birthday. It was designed as a place to entertain guests and bask in his success.

At the end of World War II, Allied troops raced to the top of the mountain. If you've watched Band of Brothers, you'll maybe know the scene.

[10 : 56] The Fuhrer is already dead, but the troops covered the walls with graffiti and smashed off shards of marble to take home as souvenirs.

Today, it's a cafe and a beer garden. Wouldn't you love to be one of those men? That's how God's enemies will be treated.

His victory is certain. In verse 12, He says, Their Babel project is doomed.

The great towns and cities built through blood will finally come to an end. And their plans, dust. I spent a year in London training as a teacher.

I loved to visit the British Museum. In room 55, you can see the remaining treasures of the Babylonian Empire in a single room.

[11 : 58] But the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea. God's victory is certain. And what will God's enemies experience at the end?

Just look at verse 16. Shame. Shame. Total exposure. A taste of their own medicine. Just look at how their idols are mocked.

Verse 18. They can't speak. They can't hear. They can't guide. They can't save.

But the Lord is in His holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before Him. I remember being at an assembly in my previous school.

The girls that I taught were usually far too well behaved. But on that day, they were unusually loud. And all of a sudden, the headmistress appeared.

[13 : 04] One look. Two words. Silence. It never happened in my day. Habakkuk 2 is here to say, that is what God's people will experience at the end.

A storm of judgment. And then total calm. Christ will reign. He will have no rivals. And I think we need to hear the taunts and the woes in this chapter.

Our tendency is just to dumb down the idea that God will judge His enemies. But it's all through the Bible. And it's a huge comfort for the church.

Just think of Christians facing persecution today. They need to know. They need to know. That one day, every knee will bow.

Most of the opposition we face is very low-key, isn't it? What we've had in Britain for the past century is abnormal in church history.

[14 : 17] Abnormal. But Christians who are persecuted are not ashamed of verses like this.

The grittiness of their experience demands it. They need it. And so may we in the years to come. Last year marked 500 years since Martin Luther kicked off the Reformation.

Listen to his greatest hymn. The tyrants of this age strut briefly on God's stage. The prince of darkness, grim.

We tremble not for him. His rage we can endure because his doom is sure. One little word shall fell him. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, numerous others struck briefly on God's stage.

They look so powerful, but they face judgment. And in case you think this is all a bit Old Testament and Jesus would say different, then listen to Paul.

[15 : 32] God has set a day, it's in the calendar, when he will judge the world by the man he has appointed, Jesus Christ.

And he has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead. I wonder, do we believe that?

Has that been airbrushed out of our theology? I think we know, don't we, that to believe in the physical, final return of the Lord Jesus Christ in our culture, it puts us right at the center of the lunatic fringe, doesn't it?

But friends, we must hold our nerve. We must not lose sight of that truth. Because Christians have held onto it for centuries.

And we must not drop the baton. Across the globe today, believers will confess in the words of the Apostles' Creed that Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead.

[16 : 54] Is that truth part of your Christian faith? To lose it would be a huge mistake.

I think the idea of justice is probably one of the most instinctive things about us. From our earliest days, we all know when to say, that's not fair.

It's my turn. It may be that in our wonderfully progressive society, we will one day reach a stage where children no longer say such things.

I have my doubts. Because deep down, we all believe, don't we, in right and wrong. We never grew out of that. And Grenfell, Windrush, victims of abuse, there is something right about justice being done.

We all believe such things. So, what right do we have to say God shouldn't? What kind of God would shrug his shoulders and not seek justice?

[18 : 04] Apathy would be so much worse. You see, if there's no final day of justice, if we came from nothing, this is the bankruptcy of our culture's secular beliefs.

If we came from nothing, if we are heading to oblivion, then nothing really matters in between.

If there is no final standard, no day of reckoning, then all the suffering in our world is pointless. But if Christ will judge, if Christ will judge, then we can have hope.

You see, if verses 2 to 5 showed us the slowness of God, verses 6 to 20 highlight the sovereignty of God. Because here, Habakkuk learns there is rescue beyond the exile.

They'd be taken away, but it wouldn't be the end. He knows he might not see the final victory, but he has faith.

[19 : 21] And he wants tonight to show us our God. He wants us to see that he is the one we can trust.

Sometimes our kids' songs put it the best, don't they? He's got the whole world in his hands. And Christians know, don't they? They know they are nail-pierced hands.

Tension he felt. The taunts that he heard. Lastly, the song that he shared. The song that he shared.

And here we're in chapter 3. Lord, I've 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 has been on a journey from wrestling to worship.

[20 : 34] And what's made the difference? Knowing God's wrath. Knowing its coming has changed his perspective. And chapter 3, probably written a little bit later, is the fruit of his whole experience.

The word prayer in verse 1 really means Sam. And so, he wants those of us who read these words to fall on our faces and worship God.

And then he wants us to stand on our feet and sing his praise. He wants the truth to go deep in our hearts. That's what happens when we sing, isn't it?

I could probably read out the words of the last song. But it wouldn't be the same, would it? Because when words are put to music, when words are sung in a group, well, it stirs our emotions, doesn't it?

It engages the heart. Many of you know that. And even more when we sing together. The song Habakkuk sings, it's full of history.

[21 : 52] Again, we won't pick out all the details, but interestingly, it's not about the last two chapters. No, it tells an older story.

As he waits for God's wrath, the commentators point out that he is really remembering God's rescue in the past. He looks forward forward by looking back.

His focus seems to be on times that God had saved in the midst of judgment. There are all kinds of allusions to events like the exodus.

Just look at verse three. God came from Timon, the holy one from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens and his praise filled the earth.

His splendor was like the sunrise, rays flashed from his hand where his power was hidden. Plague went before him. Pestilence followed his steps.

[22 : 55] He stood and shook the earth. He looked and made the nations tremble. Mountains crumbled. Hills collapsed. The language Habakkuk uses here is vivid and poetic and it's as if he has gone back in time and personally witnessed the Passover and crossed the sea.

Verse 12, in wrath you strode through the earth and in anger you threshed the nations. Verse 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. And verse 15, you trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters.

It's pretty incredible stuff, isn't it? It's a bit overwhelming to read, to be honest. And Habakkuk felt the same. I find this very reassuring.

Look at verse 16. sometimes we speak, don't we, of having an encounter with God.

[24 : 13] but look at the impact it has on Habakkuk, verse 16. Heart pounding, lips quivering, legs trembling.

As he remembers God's judgment in the past, as he waits for God's judgment in the future, Habakkuk trembles.

calamity is coming. The Babylonians are ready to pounce, but Habakkuk trusts. And friends, it is exactly the same with us.

We wait for God's rescue in the midst of God's judgment. One day Christ will come. So easy to forget that, isn't it?

a poet asks, what if this present is the world's last night?

[25 : 18] What if? Are you ready? Nothing matters more. It's so easy to have that phrase in your notes as a preacher, but it's true.

nothing matters more. Christ will judge, but we will be safe if we look to him, if our trust is in him.

Have you? Rock of ages cleft for me. Let me hide myself in thee. You see, only Christ can keep you on that day.

Nothing else, not your good works, not Christian activity, not being a good guy. None of it can save you, only Christ.

And so you see, when we think that vengeance or anger is somehow beneath God, we miss the point. We miss the point because we forget that he has been loving loving his enemies from the beginning of time.

[26 : 40] We forget that heaven will be full of those who were once in that camp. People who'll say, what on earth am I doing here?

I don't belong here, but he died for me. he died for me and I trust him.

In verses 17 to 19, these are very famous verses, aren't they? Perhaps if you know anything of Habakkuk, you might have recognized them. He gives us a picture of what this trust looks like.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes in the vines, I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God, my Saviour.

Here's a man who lives in an agrarian society and look what he says, even if the harvest fails, even if my whole life is barren, I will trust in you.

[27 : 55] Even if I lose everything, even if I don't get you fill in the blank, then I'll still find joy in my God.

Why? Because I know what ultimately counts. God's wrath is coming and I am safe and nothing else is as important as that.

Well, Habakkuk begins low, doesn't it? But it ends high, his feet like a deer going on the heights. And that's the Christian life from the valley to the heights.

And Habakkuk shows us a God that he's learned to trust. He calls us to do the same. His ways may be strange, but his victory is certain.

He knows what he's about. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul writes to a favorite church plant. We've had lots of talk of that, haven't we?

[29 : 04] Church planting in the free church. It's exciting. Well, this church plant were well known. They worked hard. They would have been all over the first century equivalent of Facebook, Twitter, all that.

We'll call them Thessalonica Free Church. Here's Thessalonica Free Church. Listen as Paul describes their conversion. You turned from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven.

Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. See, that is what it means to be a Christian waiting for Jesus who saves us from the wrath to come.

Have we forgotten that? Are we sometimes embarrassed by that? See, Jesus is more than a lifestyle choice.

Jesus is more than the answer to our needs. He is a savior. And if you're a Christian, he took God's wrath on the cross at your sin.

[30 : 27] But if you're not, then turn to him tonight. Look to him. Because there is one act left in God's drama of redemption.

everything else has been done. creation, fall, the promise of Christ, the birth of Christ, the life of Christ, the death of Christ, the ascension of Christ, the call to come to Christ, and then the return of Christ.

Is he your refuge? is he tonight your refuge?

Safest place to be in a cyclone is in the heart of it, the eye of the storm. And it's the same with the day of the Lord.

A storm is coming, but we hide from God in God. We shelter under the blood of the Lamb, and as we do, we sing thank you for the cross.

[31 : 45] Thank you for the cross. In wrath, remember mercy. Amen.