

A Song of Praise

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Preacher: Archie Winnington-Ingram

[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening. My name's Archie. I'm the pastor in training here, as Graham has said. And before we come to God's word together, let me pray. Father, you are our rock. You are a mighty fortress.

I pray that by your Holy Spirit this evening, you would help us to keep our eyes on you as we hear from you in your word. For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

If you want to turn to Habakkuk in your Bibles, it's, I'm not sure what page it's on because I don't have a pew Bible with me, but it's somewhere around 950 probably. First person to get there, shout out what page number it is.

What's that? 942, page 942, Habakkuk chapter 3. Whilst you try and find that, let me start by telling a quick story about when I was a teenager. When I was a teenager, I thought I knew the streets of Edinburgh really, really, really well, right?

I lived out in West Lothian, and I would get the train in all the time. Train to Waverley, Prince's Street, Royal Mile. Nothing more to know. So I thought.

[1 : 0 9] Then I went on a trip to this place, to Camera Obscura. I don't know if you've ever been to Camera Obscura. I haven't been in years, to be honest, not since I was at school. But it is amazing. It's just at the top of the Royal Mile.

And the way it works, you get to this building. It's a tall building. When you get there, you go to this room at the top, a darkened room, and there's a sort of table in the middle. And on that table is projected a bird's eye view of the whole of Edinburgh.

It's like a sort of live version of Google Earth. The incredible thing about it is it's been there since the 1800s. I have no idea how it works. I think it's probably magic, but it is amazing.

You should go. At the time, though, I had never seen a map of Edinburgh before. So I thought, Prince's Street, Royal Mile, nothing more to know. I didn't have Google Maps on my phone like we do today.

And when I saw the whole city laid out like that, it just gave me a whole new perspective of this city that I love to visit. Saw Leith Walk and Arthur's Seat and the Meadows.

[2 : 1 1] There was just so much more to Edinburgh than I had thought that there was. It totally changed my experience of this city. Now, in a much, much bigger way than that, through the questioning process that we've seen Habakkuk go on through this book, his perspective has been changing.

If you haven't been here the last two Sundays, do head to our website and have a listen to where we've been. But by way of summary, Habakkuk begins in chapter one with a very honest question.

He says to God, what are you going to do about the injustice among your people in Judah? God responds that he will, by way of the oncoming Babylonian war machine, bring justice on that sinful people in Judah.

It's a surprising justice. And then Habakkuk asks another honest question. He's not petulant or grumpy or complaining. He accepts God's word.

He accepts the oncoming justice, but he just doesn't understand why God would do that. Why would God use an evil foreign empire to bring justice on his own people?

[3 : 23] And God responds by saying, well, he will also bring justice to the Babylonians, not because of the justice that they have executed under his restraint, but because they are an arrogant, prideful, and self-sufficient people.

And if God is a God of justice, he has to judge a people who are like that. And yet, in chapter two, verse four, maybe have a look at chapter two, verse four.

This is a key verse for the book. Behold, his soul is puffed up. It is not upright within him. That's the Babylonian.

But the righteous will live by his faith. God says that he will judge the proud, the puffed up, the self-reliant, and that the humble, those with faith relying on God, they will live.

And so it is this. This is Habakkuk's renewed perspective of God's salvation, and it is great cause for celebration. And that's what we're going to get in today's passage.

[4 : 32] It's a celebration. It's a song of prayerful praise. It's praise for the God that we read about in Romans chapter three at the beginning of our service this evening.

The God who has made a way to be both just and the one who justifies those who have faith in him. So Habakkuk chapter three, let's read it together.

A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet on Shagianoth. Lord, I have 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. God came from Teman, 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.

[5 : 35] Plague went before him. Pestilence followed his steps. 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 forever. I saw the tents of Cush in distress. The dwellings of Midian in anguish.

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? You uncovered your bow.

You called for many arrows. You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you and writhed. Torrents of water swept by. The deep roared and lifted its waves on high.

Sun and moon stood still in the heavens at the glint of your flying arrows, at the lightning of your flashing spear. In wrath you strode through the earth, and in anger you threshed the nations.

[6 : 39] 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.

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. You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters.

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. 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. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

[7 : 44] I will be joyful in God my Savior. The sovereign Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer. He enables me to tread on the heights.

For the director of music on my stringed instruments. I want you to imagine with me. Let me take you back. If you've been here over the last couple of Sunday evenings, this is a familiar picture.

It's World War II. We've been on the stormy boat to France. We've pictured ourselves on the beaches of Normandy, and we've thought about that sort of strange in-between.

Victory at D-Day is secure, but the battle still rages. You've lost friends. You're exhausted. But you are getting ever closer to Berlin. You're getting ever closer to the enemy surrender.

You can almost feel it. For us, over the last three weeks, this has been a picture of life, really. And there is no denying it.

[8 : 45] Wherever you stand, whatever your worldview is tonight, whether you have faith or not, for all of us in life, there is pain. There is trauma.

As we look around us, there is injustice. There is mess. And yes, as a Christian, we stand on this side of the cross, this side of D-Day, if you like.

And as we read the promises of Habakkuk, that ultimately eternal justice will be done, as we get ever closer to that final victory, we can nevertheless not deny that there is mess.

The Christian life just doesn't look as victorious as we might have hoped. And yet, we can, with Habakkuk, praise our God.

We can praise him because we know what he has done. And we can praise him because we know what he says he is going to do.

[9 : 46] For Christ has come, and Christ will come again. Now, this chapter of God's Word, as I've already said, it's not an ordinary sort of spoken prayer that might look like it.

It really is a song. I don't know if you noticed it in verse 1. Have a look at verse 1. It might be in italics for you. It's a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet on Shagianoth.

Now, you might be asking, I was certainly asking, what on earth is Shagianoth? It seems to be, according to those clever people who write commentaries, one of those musical instructions that we sometimes get in the Psalms.

It's maybe a tune to sing this to, or an instrument, or a way of playing an instrument that goes along with these words. And then you have the word Sela throughout. If you're in the Pew Bibles, you'll have a footnote saying that there is Sela's throughout this.

Some of your Bibles, if you've got your own, might actually have them printed. That might be a footnote, but it is in the text, really. And that's probably, again, a sort of musical pause, maybe a change of tone or a change of tempo.

[10 : 51] And then right at the end of the chapter, as if to hammer it home, go there with me, verse 19. This chapter is written to the choir master with stringed instruments.

This is no ordinary prayer. It was obviously intended to be sung. Why? Well, I think because it is also to be remembered and to be internalized.

It's amazing what singing does, isn't it? It was true of soldiers during World War II belting out a chorus of, we'll meet again. Picture yourself there singing it arm in arm.

We begin to internalize those words. We might not know how or when, but we're sure that we'll meet again. If you've ever been to Murrayfield and sung the national anthem, you'll have experienced it there too.

And how much more important when we're singing about our God? I trust here in church we're singing songs that contain words of truth, real truth.

[11 : 55] And it's important that if we listen to Christian music elsewhere, which is a really good thing to do, it's just really important with such a huge array of worship songs on offer that we're careful, that we're discerning, that we listen to songs and sing songs that contain truth that we can trust.

Because there is something about music and something about singing that takes words from the head and begins to see them absorbed by the heart. And that is especially true when we sing together.

It's why we do it here at church. When I was at university, I had a friend who actually refused to sit next to me in church because my singing was so bad and so loud that he couldn't help but laugh.

And maybe some of you will have had the joy of experiencing that here at Brunsfield. But even if we are terrible at singing, there is no denying that it engages the heart in a way that sitting at home and watching online simply doesn't manage.

If you are watching this online, listening to it back on the website, or if you're here and you've slipped into that habit of occasionally missing church, maybe saying to yourself, it's okay, I can just watch it online this week.

[13 : 06] You need to see that that just isn't the same thing. There may be no option for you, and it's great that we're able to do that when there really is no choice. But watching a service online is no substitute for singing arm in arm with your brothers and sisters as truths about God move from your head to your heart.

And so here we have a particularly important prayer preserved in song for faithful believers as they gather together through the ages. And in this song, we see that Habakkuk firstly praises God for what he has done and who he is in verses 3 to 15.

And then he praises God for what he will do in verses 16 to 19. You have done it before, he says. You will do it again.

So let's start in verse 2. It's a bit like a prologue for the rest of the chapter, verse 2. So just the first half of it. Have a look at verse 2. Lord, I have heard of your fame.

I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. And so what is to come starts with praises for what God has done and who he is. Habakkuk has waited patiently to hear from the Lord.

[14 : 25] And what he has heard, what he has seen, that which he is about to share, it is literally so incredible to him that he cannot help but fear him. He stands in awe of him.

So what is it that God has done? Well, for Habakkuk, the big salvation event in the history of Israel is the exodus.

It's the rescue out of slavery from Egypt and the conquering of Canaan, the promised land. And so that's what we get in these verses.

It's a retelling in song of that story. See, in verse 3, we get Mount Paran, that's often associated with Sinai and the wilderness, where God's people met with him after they had been rescued out of slavery.

And at Mount Sinai, in the wake of that exodus story, God, he revealed his power to his people in thundering clouds and great flashes of lightning. Just like in verse 4.

[15 : 26] Have a look at verse 4. This image, it's like something from a Marvel film, isn't it?

You can almost imagine the scene, a superhero descending on clouds with lightning coming out of their hands or something. But notice that that is only what happens when God's power is hidden or the ESV maybe puts it more helpfully, veiled.

Do you see that at the end of that verse? Just imagine the awesome sight of the full power and glory of this God. It's indescribable. It's unimaginable.

Even the creative boffins at Marvel would not be able to do it justice. And the exodus story continues in verse 5. Plague went before him.

Pestilence followed his steps. Very often in the Bible, pestilence and plague are signs of God's judgment. And of course, famously, there were the plagues in Egypt when Pharaoh's heart was hard.

[16 : 32] And God judges him in this way. And then he brings his people victorious into the promised land. And in verse 6, as he does that, God shakes the nations. He stood and shook the earth.

He looked and made the nations tremble. As God leads the Israelites in victory from Egypt into Canaan, I wonder maybe if that's even a specific picture of the walls of Jericho falling before God's faithful people.

Not as they tore them down themselves, but as they trusted God on their way into the promised land. And as Habakkuk looks back, the echoes of Exodus continue.

Do you notice all the water imagery in these verses? In verse 8, have a look at verse 8. Were you angry with the rivers, Lord? Was your wrath against the streams?

Did you rage against the sea? I think in this water imagery, Habakkuk probably has the parting of the Red Sea in mind. Again, in the Exodus story, as God's people rode their horses and chariots to safety, and the following Egyptians were swallowed by the white wave horses of the sea.

[17 : 42] Habakkuk is looking back at this incredible salvation and praising God for what he has done. But in doing so, he is also praising God for who he is eternally.

See, God doesn't change. Even as we remember what he has done and our perspective of him changes, he remains the same.

In the Bible, water and the sea is very often an anti-God image. It represents sort of chaos and evil and destruction. And yet in these verses, did you notice how God has total command over the waters?

God is a victorious God. God has total command over the waters of the sea. He has done it before for his people. And just a hint here, that the final victory over evil is his too.

We get, I think, a further hint of that final victory over evil in verse 13. Have you come to verse 13 with me? You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one.

[18 : 46] You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness. You stripped him from head to foot. Now remember, Habakkuk, he's looking back here. So he's describing how God has defeated their enemies, crushing their heads, as the ESV translation has it.

Humiliating them by laying them out naked for all to see. Apparently that was a common practice for victorious kings and their enemies, humiliating them like this. Now Habakkuk is, he's recounting the victories of God, of what he's done.

But there are also allusions, if you notice them here, to the promises of Genesis chapter 3. Genesis chapter 3, right at the beginning of the Bible, where the serpent, an image of evil, if you like, enters creation.

And where God promises that the woman's offspring would bruise or crush the head of the serpent. So again, we have praises for what God has done, but also praises for who he is eternally.

And that's true in the Bible. Whenever we read about God's work in history, it is always in one way or another pointing us to God's work in Jesus. And ultimately to the end of all of history when he returns.

[19 : 59] God has overcome his enemies in history. And he is also ultimately victorious over all of history. He has done it before. He will do it again.

This is the perspective of Habakkuk having had his dialogue with God. He's been reminded of what God has done, of who God is. And he's about to begin to look ahead to what God will do.

But before we get there, just from our perspective. How much more can we sing the praises of what God has done in the light of Christ and the cross?

For us, on this side of Jesus, this side of the cross, this side of D-Day, even as we struggle to see God's purposes in the world, instead, as we look around us and see the mess, as we struggle to see his purposes in the hurts and the pains of everyday life, whatever it is that we are facing, know this, that when God looked his weakest, when he looked most defeated at the cross, when it looked as though the world had won, in that moment he was doing what he had always promised to do.

He was crushing the serpent's head. He was defeating the anti-God chaos of the sea. He was overcoming evil. And it's a surprising justice.

[21 : 34] In that moment, he was making a way for you and for me, despite our contributions to the injustice and mess of the world, despite the judgment that we deserve.

He was making a way for us to know him today. That is a surprising justice, but it is very good news. Isn't that good news?

So Habakkuk praises God for what he has done, but he now turns to praise God for what he is going to do. Have a look back at the rest of verse two, the bit of verse two that we didn't read earlier.

Here, Habakkuk is saying, you have done it before.

Do it again. Revive, repeat, renew your work. Do it again. Rescue your people. Make it known. Reveal it.

[22 : 38] Help your people to see. Habakkuk has no doubt that God's righteous wrath is coming. It is who God is. He is a just God. He has to judge the proud.

He has to judge those who perpetuate mess and injustice. If he is a God of justice, then he has to judge them. But Habakkuk can also appeal to God's mercy.

He is a God of justice, but he is also merciful. For those who are humble and rely on him in faith, though they too deserve judgment, for them God has mercy.

And so here Habakkuk really pleads God's character back to him, and he asks him to act, to do it again. And so I think verse 2 sets up for us what Habakkuk goes on to say in verses 16 to 19, where he praises God for what he is going to do.

In verse 16, we first get this response from Habakkuk to what God has done, and also as Habakkuk looks ahead, this is how he responds. I heard, and my heart pounded.

[23 : 47] My lips quivered at the sound. Decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. As Habakkuk responds and anticipates, his heart, his lips, his legs are just shaking.

He's unable to hold himself. I don't know if you know the feeling after a really intense leg workout, or after getting off the bike, you can barely walk. Habakkuk is a bit like that.

He's just wobbling all over the place in response to God. Now, I think in this country, we can be quite British about this sort of physical reaction to God's glory.

Sometimes maybe rightly skeptical. But this sort of fear in the face of what God has done and is going to do is all over the Bible.

As people hear about who God is and hear about his plans, I mean, even Jesus in his anguish over what God is about to do, he sweats drops of blood, doesn't he?

[24 : 48] Maybe we could respond more fearfully to this God and his plans for this world. What are those plans? For Habakkuk, as he sits and waits on God's plans, we've seen throughout this book, he knows that God is going to bring justice.

He's going to bring justice on Judah by the Babylonians, but he's also going to bring justice on the Babylonians. In verse 17, though, we get a picture, I think, of what is coming to Judah through the Babylonians.

In verse 17, This is a devastating image.

Judah's life was a farming life. Fig trees, vines, olives, flocks, cattle. That was what they had. That was everything that they had. Judah is being stripped of everything in this judgment.

That's the image. And yet, in verse 18, Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God, my Savior.

[26 : 17] How can Habakkuk say that? Well, it's because in that day, when judgment is brought on the people of Judah, when those who have turned away from their God are brought low, still those who are faithful to this God will rejoice.

Why? Well, remember chapter 2 and verse 3. Because the righteous will live by faith. When Babylon comes, those in Judah who have faith in him will receive their salvation.

And that's exactly what happened. There was a faithful remnant. It's faith in the mess. And for us, this is just so important, living as we do in a messy world, living this side of the cross.

God's surprising justice has been done, but his complete justice is still to come. And in the meantime, it's a messy world. But we can, even amidst that mess, rejoice in the Lord.

Be joyful in God our Savior, knowing what he has done, knowing what he will do, because Christ has come, and Christ will come again. This is faith in the mess.

[27 : 31] But it's not easy, is it? And so in the meantime, have a look at verse 19. God, the Lord, is my strength.

He makes my feet like the deers. He makes me tread on high places. For those in Judah, though the Lord would bring them salvation, the world was nonetheless going to remain a mess.

They were going to face challenges. Why else would they need the strength of the Lord? Why else would they need to be given the secure footing of a deer? Why else would they be given the ability to tread on the high places, to walk with him?

It is surely because though they have been saved by their God, they nonetheless need him in order to persevere by faith in this life. And God gives them everything that they need to be able to do that.

Just so, do we not desperately need God today? I do. Don't we need him as we navigate the messy world in which we live?

[28 : 40] We do not know for certain what our future in this world contains. None of us do. But we can be sure that we're still going to face trials in this world.

Trials that make our God feel very small and the world feel all-consuming. In the midst of our busy lives, our families at school or university or at work, just so aware that our God can feel very small and the world around us can feel very scary, as though it's demanding all of our attention.

God does not promise that he, does not just promise, sorry, that he will ultimately do justice in that mess.

He does promise that. He promises to do ultimate justice. But he also promises that he will give us everything that we need in the meantime to persevere, to persevere in faith.

Isn't that good news? The change in perspective that I was given when I saw the wonders of Camera Obscura really did change my experience of this city.

[29 : 48] A bit like Habakkuk with a new, renewed perspective of God. He remembered what God had done. He saw what God was going to do and his experience changed. It changed from questioning into praise.

Camera Obscura was a game changer for me, but it was nothing compared to the game changer and the invention of Google Maps on my phone. And how much more can we delight in the God of our salvation as we remember what God has done for us and what God is going to do for us in Jesus?

He has come. He will come again. Friends, if God has done it before, then we can be certain that the final victory is his. With D-Day behind us and the victory ever nearer with each step that we take, how much more can we sing the praises of what God is going to do in light of Jesus Christ's promised return?

And so as your body aches, as your mind is tired, fed up with the monotony of life, in your most painful relationship, in your greatest anxieties, when you are frustrated at your own sin, in all of that mess, would you have faith in this God?

His promise is that one day we will be with him. No more tears, no more pain, new creation, new body, no more sin, no more mess.

[31 : 22] We can have faith in this God. He's always faithful. He has done it before. He'll do it again. Christ has come. He is coming.

Once, finally, and for all whose faith is in him. This is faith in the mess.