

2. Which God do we believe in?

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[0 : 00] Our reading today is on page 785, continuing with the prophet Habakkuk. I said last week the prophecy consists of a protest, a complaint, a lament by Habakkuk, and then an answer by the Lord, and we looked at the first complaint and the first answer last week, where he was amazed to discover what God was doing, first of all amazed to appear that God was doing nothing, and then to find out what he was doing, which was even more puzzling.

We're going to look now at Habakkuk's second complaint. I said last week, complaint's a rather unfortunate word. He's not whinging, he's not moaning, he's asking big questions.

Is God in control? What's he doing in the world? So let's read then from chapter 1, verse 12, to chapter 2, verse 1.

Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and your rock have established them for reproof.

You are of purer eyes than to see evil, and cannot look at wrong. Why do you idly look at traitors, and are silent when the wicked swallows up a man more righteous than he?

[1 : 23] You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He brings all of them up with a hook. He drags them out with his net.

He gathers them in his dragnet. So he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net, and makes offerings to his dragnet.

For by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich. Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and mercilessly killing nations forever?

I will take my stand at my watch post, and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

Amen. That is the word of the Lord to us, and may he bless it to our hearts and minds as we study it. There is a Jewish prayer which consists of various shapes and forms, but it's something like this.

[2 : 26] Oh Lord, if this is what it's like when you're on our side, what's it going to be like when you turn against us? And that is very much the situation of the prophet Habakkuk.

Habakkuk cannot understand why it is that God has raised up this cruel, militaristic nation of the Babylonians, or Chaldeans, and he's going actually to use them to destroy God's people.

That's the situation which the prophet is faced. God's people are in danger of being destroyed.

They're in danger, they're going to be sent away into exile. And how does that fit in with the God that Habakkuk believes in?

Is he the God that he believed in? Taking the argument a stage further. First of all, at the beginning of chapter 1, Habakkuk had said, Lord, why are you doing nothing?

And the Lord had answered, well, I am actually doing something. The events now unfolding are what I'm doing. But the trouble is, the answer is worse than the problem, it seems.

[3 : 27] The cure is worse than the disease. He's about to bring a militaristic nation to destroy his own people. And what we've got here in Habakkuk's second complaint, it seems to me, is a good way of handling a tough time of questioning.

All of us face times like this. Maybe national and international affairs. It may be a crisis in our own lives. When what we believe about God doesn't seem to fit with the way that God is behaving.

So what does Habakkuk do? First of all, he focuses on God himself. There's always the danger of taking the problem first, and then saying, what does God have to say about this?

Whether we take the problem first, we're going to be overwhelmed. We're going to be dismayed.

And we're going to try and fit God into the problem. Habakkuk doesn't do that. Habakkuk says, what is God like?

Is God who we believe he is? And that's the first two verses. Verses 12 and into the first part of verse 13. Notice the contrast.

[4 : 37] Notice the contrast. My God in verse 12. And then back in verse 11. Their God. What Habakkuk is saying is the Chaldeans have a God as well, but their God is themselves.

They worship themselves. They worship their power. They worship their militarism. They worship their culture. That comes out again later in verse 16. He sacrifices to his net.

In other words, he sacrifices to his military power. But the essential point is this. The Chaldeans have gods, but they are human inventions. The Chaldean gods are simply projections of themselves.

You look at the big screen of the universe, and what do they see? They see a mega Chaldean. Somebody powerful. Somebody rich. Somebody totally vindictive.

In other words, they look up at the sky, and they see themselves. Habakkuk is very different. Habakkuk is turning back to the God whom he believes in. Our help, says the Samist, is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

[5 : 43] Chaldean gods are human inventions. This God is not a human invention. He made humanity. And the first thing he says about this God is that he is eternal. Are you not from everlasting?

The Chaldean empire had risen in time. Seventy years after this it was to disappear, never to rise again. Verse 12 says, Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment.

This eternal God, in other words, has brought this empire into space and time. This God is a God who was and is and is to come.

Never was a time he wasn't there. Never is. He's here now. And there never will be a time he's not there. So that's the first thing about him. He is eternal, and he's not taken by surprise by particular circumstances.

You may be in a real crisis at the moment. You may have been in a real time of perplexity which has taken you totally by surprise. God is not taken by surprise.

[6 : 48] He's eternal. He knows the end from the beginning. The second thing about God is he is the Lord. Now that is the name of Israel's God, the name by which he made a covenant with them to Moses.

God has committed himself to his people by promises that he cannot and will not break. In other words, he's not just the great power from everlasting to everlasting.

He is the God who comes down and makes promises. He revealed this name to Moses at the time of the Exodus. And in chapter 3, Habakkuk is going to re-imagine the Exodus as well.

He's going to say, God, you're not just the God of the Exodus. You didn't just handle Pharaoh and Egypt. You can handle Babylon as well. He's eternal.

He's the Lord. He is my God, as I've already mentioned. In other words, the God with whom Habakkuk has a relationship. One of the things about the pagan gods is people had to pester them.

[7 : 51] People had to badger them to get any attention. The God of the Bible is not far from us. As Paul says to the Athenians, he's listening for us.

He's waiting for a response. What else about God? God is the Lord of history. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment. Whatever is happening, the Lord is there.

The Lord is in control. And he is the rock. We can build our lives safely on him. What do you build your life on? Do you build it on insurance policies?

Do you build it on relationships? Do you build it on work? Do you build it on hedonism, some kind of happiness? Now, all these things are gifts from God. But God himself is the only one on whom we can build our lives.

Insurance policies may collapse. Relationships may fail. Anything else is passing. We can't build our lives on them.

[8 : 52] And God says Habakkuk is holy. Verse 13. You're of purer eyes than to see evil. But this is the root of the problem, isn't it?

How can a holy God use an utterly wicked nation to punish a less wicked one? That's the problem of Habakkuk. But the problem is not as simple as that.

We all deserve judgment. Jesus was to tell people who pointed out disasters that had happened. Unless you repent, you'll perish as well. We are all under the judgment of God.

So that's the first thing. And what kind of God do we believe in? He is all these things. He's the rock. He's the Lord. He's the eternal God. He's the Lord of history. And he's holy. Now from that vantage point, we can return to the problem.

And we can ask a second question. Are things as bad as they seem? Who is God? Now secondly, are things as bad as they seem? That's really verses 13 to the end of the chapter.

[9 : 56] Now in one sense, they're worse. They are really dreadful. The exile is about to engulf them. And the question that Habakkuk is asking is a question asked in the Psalms.

Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the unscrupulous, the cruel, the rich, the powerful, why do they get away with it? And Habakkuk returns to a theme he's already raised, the theme of cruelty in verses 14 and following.

You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. Babylon is behaving like the great fisher of the nations. As if the king of Babylon and the gods of Babylon are standing above the lake which is filled with human life.

And into that they're putting the dragnet. Into that they're putting the fish hook. They behave as if they were lords of people and lords of people's destinies. In other words, they're behaving as if verses 12 to 13 weren't true.

They're behaving as if they were God, as if there wasn't actually an eternal God who is the judge and who is the lord of history and who is holy. And the mystery that Habakkuk reveals to us is that this is allowed for a time.

[11 : 10] Just as God allowed the Nazis. Just as he allowed the communists. Just as he allows other regimes which despise and destroy human life.

Not because God approves of these regimes. Not because God loves these kind of things to happen. But because he is working for a bigger good.

As Joseph says long ago at the end of Genesis to his brothers who had ill-treated him so dreadfully. You meant it for evil but God meant it for good. And that's something we can write over so much of history.

The catastrophes of history. The difficulties of our own lives. God meant it for good. That's what Habakkuk is saying to the people of today. That's what Habakkuk is saying to us now.

Their cruelty. And the other thing he refers to is their greed. Verse 16. Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet. For by them he lives in luxury.

[12 : 10] A luxurious lifestyle at the expense of others. Amos the prophet 150 years before had attacked this. And surely we have not learned this lesson in the affluent western countries.

Isn't it true that we live in luxury and worship the net and make offerings to the dragnet. When you think of the appalling poverty and the deprivation and so on.

The luxurious lifestyle of so many throughout so much of the world. We haven't learned this lesson. We haven't learned not to trust in money in other words.

We haven't learned not to trust in riches. We haven't truly learned how to trust in God. So is God who he says he is? And Habakkuk brings the great truths of God.

Proved throughout their history. Particularly proved at the time of the Exodus. Is the situation awful? Well it is. In fact it's worse than awful. It really is. It's bad and it's going to get worse before it gets better.

[13 : 14] The final question he raises. And this is chapter 2 verse 1. Is there another way to look at this? Can we look at the situation in other words from the perspective of God himself?

I will take my stand, says Habakkuk, at my watch post and station myself on the tower. And look out to see what he will say to me. And what I will answer concerning my complaint.

This is one of the unhelpful chapter divisions. This verse clearly belongs to chapter 1. Remember the chapter divisions are not inspired. It's good when you're reading a short prophet like Habakkuk. To read him aloud and read him right through. And get the whole impact. What's it going to look like from the watch tower, so to speak? Now I live in Edinburgh.

And many of you, mostly I imagine, will know the historic centre of Edinburgh. The very characterful but rather cramped Royal Mile that goes up from Holyrood Palace to the castle.

[14 : 15] Let's say the Royal Mile and the grass market and so on are very characterful. But they're very cramped. You don't get much sense of perspective. If you're beneath one of the towering tenements, you can't see very much other than the towering tenement.

But if you go up to the castle, the castle rock, and look out on a good clear day. And see much of southern Scotland spread before you. You get quite different perspective.

You're no longer cramped down below. You're looking at it from above. You're looking at it, so to speak, from God's perspective. We all know those beautiful books of aerial photographs.

And photography, of course, is an art form nowadays. Where you, as it were, take the view of the eagle. Looking from above. At landscapes. At seas.

At rivers. At mountains. And meadowlands. And pastures. And cities. That's what Habakkuk is saying. And first of all, he says, I'm going to look to God. I will look out to see what he will say to me.

[15:15] Habakkuk is saying the answer is not in creation itself, nor in history. We can't simply look around at creation and say there is the answer. Creation is good, but it's fallen.

History has many wonderful things in it. It also has many evil things in it. And part of the problem of much of our contemporary thinking is we've been trapped in a naturalistic world view.

Dawkins is only one of the most recent people to talk about to the world without God. Way back a hundred years ago, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the people who established the thought patterns which have dominated for so much of that time, people like Bertrand Russell, people like the Huxleys and so on, who basically told people, if you want to understand the world, you must study the world.

And only the world. There's nothing beyond it. There's no point in looking up. There's no point in looking out. This space-time universe is all there is.

And what happens when we do that? We learn a lot of interesting things. I'm not saying for a minute we shouldn't study these things. But if that's the end, then what do we end up with? We end up, as Bertrand Russell did, on his deathbed, in hopeless despair.

[16:36] On his deathbed he spoke of looking into an utter black void of hopeless despair. If you'd read the book of Ecclesiastes, that would have told him that's exactly what happens.

If you read the book of Ecclesiastes, everything, the key phrase is under the sun, under heaven. If you take everything that we value, education, relationships, wealth, all the glories of civilization, which, as I say, are not to be mocked.

They're wonderful if they're received as gifts of God. But if they're not, if they're seen as ends in themselves, what do we end up? We end up with what the author calls vanity, futility, emptiness. And that's why Habakkuk is determined. He's not going to look at history for the answer. He's not going to look at creation for the answer. Rather, he's going to look to the Lord of creation, to the Lord of history.

And notice he is saying, I will see what he will say to me. He's going to listen to a word from God. The great thing about the God of the Bible is that he speaks to us.

[17:40] The pagan gods did not speak. The pagan gods were silent. But this God, this God speaks. And one day, that word is going to take human flesh.

When Jesus Christ, the full word of God, comes, he is going to take flesh. And this book, the Bible, the written word, fully and faithfully points to the living word.

So we need to pray. We don't literally need to get up on the top of Edinburgh Castle or I used to love the view from Durham Cathedral when I lived in Durham.

See the whole of the north of England right up to the borders on a clear day. But we need spiritually, if you like, to rise above it. Listen to what God will say. And the second thing he's going to do is he's going to expect an answer.

Look to me what he will say and what I will answer concerning my complaint. And that is going to be picked up in the passage we'll look at next week. Verse 3, the vision awaits.

[18:39] It's a point in time. If it seems slow, wait for it. It will surely come. Now, waiting on the Lord is not sitting idly doing nothing.

What do we do when we wait on the Lord? When we wait on the Lord, we go about the business he's given us to do. We do it well and faithfully for him. But all the time, we are waiting for his answer to come.

And Isaiah the prophet tells us those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They will use the very image, they will mount up with wings like eagles.

Say, maybe just taking the stand on the watch star. So, as we look at this little passage from Habakkuk, we see how Habakkuk begins with God.

Who God is. That's who we must begin. We see that having seen God, then he can look at realistically. You see, Habakkuk's not living in fantasy lines. He's not saying, I looked at God. And then I look back again at the Babylonians.

[19 : 39] They're really all nice people. He says, the Babylonians are awful. Even worse than I thought at first. But, I'm going to take the view, God's view. I'm going to stand on the watch tower.

I'm going to wait for an answer. I pray that God will burn that message into our hearts. Whatever our circumstances may be. As we wait for him.

As we wait for his revelation to us. As we wait for his answer to come. Well, let's have a moment's prayer as we finish. Lord, we realise there is much that is confusing and perplexing.

We are often driven near to despair. We are often uncertain what way to take. But we praise you for your great promise that those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength.

We pray that may be our experience. We pray that we will rise on wings like eagles. We will run and not be weary. We will walk and not faint.

[20 : 43] And so, bless us now as we go back to our daily business. And help us in the busyness of our lives. To have the perspective of the eagle. The stance upon the watch tower.

Waiting in faith and in expectation for you to answer. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, many thanks for coming again.

And should I point out to you the books. And I think there's on the DVDs and so on. If you'd like to browse before you go. Thank you very much. Thank you.

Thank you.