

The Perplexity that the Righteous Have

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to have our Bible reading now, and you'll find that on page 785 of our church Bibles, and we'll be reading from Habakkuk chapter 1, which Phil will be preaching to us from tonight.

So that's page 785, Habakkuk chapter 1. The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.
O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you, violence, and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong?
Destruction and violence are before me. Strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth.

For the wicked surround the righteous. So justice goes forth perverted. The Lord answers, Look among the nations and see.

[1 : 14] Wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth to seize dwellings not their own.

They are dreaded and fearsome. Their justice and dignity go forth from themselves. Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves.

Their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle, swift to devour. They all come for violence.

All their faces forward. They gather captives like sand. At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it.

Then they sweep by like the wind and go on. Guilty men, whose own might is their God. Habakkuk replies, Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One?

[2 : 24] We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you either look at traitors and are silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. And he, that is the enemy, 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.

[3 : 35] Well, that reading shows a despairing prophet unable to comprehend the judgment awaiting God's people. Habakkuk just simply cannot get his head around how God could use Israel's unrighteous enemies in judgment over them.

Well, good evening everyone. Please do have a Bible open to the book of Habakkuk. And if you've lost your place, you'll find that on page 785 of the Church Bibles.

And God willing, over the next four weeks, we're going to be looking at this precious Old Testament prophet, this book together. And before we come to hear God's word, let's pray together.

In Romans chapter 15, we are told, Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures, we might have hope.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that everything that is written in the Old Testament has been written for us, so that we may be encouraged and helped to endure, trusting in your Son, Jesus Christ.

[4 : 49] Thank you for this book of Habakkuk. And like Habakkuk, we come before you, seeking your wisdom and understanding. We pray that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would help us to believe and listen with faith.

We pray in Christ's precious name. Amen. I wonder if you've ever witnessed an intense dialogue between two people or two different parties. It seems today every time you turn on the news on your TV, you can't miss an intense dialogue.

Usually it's some journalist grilling a politician about something they've done wrong. Or if you've just had Christmas with any normal family, then you are bound to have witnessed some sort of an intense dialogue on Christmas Day between family members, I'm sure.

Well, maybe your families are a lot nicer than mine. But there you go. I hope my parents aren't here tonight. Sometimes witnessing an intense dialogue can be very embarrassing.

I was once sitting in a Glasgow coffee shop, and outside of the window were two enormous men. They must have been in their 50s, and they started to behave like screaming toddlers. They would give my son Benjamin a run for his money.

[5 : 58] And they were fighting over the car park space, and in the end, they actually ended up wrestling each other on the road and rolling about as though they were kids. It was very embarrassing. Well, as we read Habakkuk, we are really listening in on an intense dialogue between the Lord and Habakkuk the prophet.

But unlike the Glaswegian drivers, this intense dialogue is so good for us to witness. It's just as you would expect with any part of God's word, full of precious lessons about our God and lessons about the life of faith, what we should expect as believers in an unjust and broken world.

And this evening, what I want us to do is, I want us to run through the text, the dialogue, so that we can understand what's being said, and so we feel the intensity. And then what I'll do with the remaining minutes is point out two lessons, two things that we learn from this dialogue.

Well, the book begins with Habakkuk's perplexing concern. Please look at verse 2. He says, Oh Lord, how long shall I cry out for help? And you will not hear.

Here is a man with a deep burden, crying out in utter frustration because the Lord has refused to answer his prayer. He's been desperately praying over and over again and again for the Lord to take action and deal with evil.

[7 : 20] I just noticed it's not evil going on out there in the world. It's specifically the evil that Habakkuk sees happening within God's covenant people, within the people of Judah, God's Old Testament church.

And what Habakkuk does is he stockpiles up all of the horrors that he sees God's people carrying out in verse 2 to 4. Just run your eye over those verses and I'll shout out the things that he mentions.

He sees violence, iniquity, wrong, destruction, violence again, strife, contention, injustice, persecution of the righteous, and perversion.

And as a result of all these things that the people are doing, he says in verse 4, God's law has been nullified, utterly paralyzed. Just remember who these people were.

These people were chosen by God to be a special and holy people. A kingdom of priests. God had rescued them by pure grace out of the land of Egypt at the Exodus to be his inheritance, his precious son.

[8 : 25] And God planted them, you remember, in the promised land so that they would obey his law, his good commandments out of faith and love for the Lord. And as they did that, as they obeyed the Lord's commandments, they would show off to all of the world the beauty of the true living God of Israel.

They were to be a light to the Gentiles, reflecting God's goodness everywhere. But by Habakkuk's time, Judah was dominated by unbelief and disobedience.

Having spurned the grace of God, the people of light had now become the people of darkness, almost indistinguishable from the unbelieving pagan nations that surrounded them.

But having said that, within Judah, within the people, there was a remnant, those who were the true people of faith. Verse 4 calls them the righteous. Now that does not mean that they were sinless, but it means that they were righteous in the sense that they believed God's promises and kept covenant with him.

And the trouble is, they're obeying God, but it's not doing them any good. In fact, the opposite is the case. They're obeying God and trusting him, and they're suffering because of it.

[9 : 39] They're being unjustly abused by the wicked within God's church. And it's tragically the same today, isn't it, in the church? Unbelieving synods, perverted presbyteries, and liberal church members seem to be doing everything they possibly can to nullify and paralyze God's moral law.

And those who love Christ and seek to obey his teaching often find themselves surrounded, opposed, and bullied within the church. Now church authorities, when they see all this, they don't bat an eyelid.

Instead of exercising church discipline against sin, they idly turn a blind eye and even affirm sinful behavior as godliness. That's the situation that Habakkuk sees every day all around him.

And what makes him so utterly perplexed in all of this is the fact that what he knows to be true about God seems to be at loggerheads with his current experience of God. Habakkuk knows how God's covenant with his people worked.

The Lord had clearly said to his people, if you obey my law of life, then you'll be blessed. But if you reject me and disobey my law of life, well then, you'll be cursed.

[10 : 54] Habakkuk knows that's what the Lord had promised. And so as he looks around at the people of God and all of the flagrant evil being done by church members, the way in which the Lord's name has been constantly dragged through the mud every day, he is utterly perplexed and the Lord seems to be doing nothing about it.

And that's why he cries, how long, oh Lord? Why am I still looking at this evil? Don't you care that your name is being smeared through the mud? Don't you care that true believers are suffering? Why are you not taking action against the wicked as you said you would? Are you just being idle? Imagine saying that to God. Are you being idle, God? answer me, please.

Well, in verse 5, the Lord finally does respond to his perplexed prophet. And you can probably picture Habakkuk thinking, oh yes, here we go. The good news I've been waiting for.

Swift salvation and justice for the people of faith. Well, just imagine the shock that must have pulsed through the prophet as he heard verse 5 and 6. Because the Lord takes Habakkuk's eyes off of the injustice going on within Judah, within the church.

[12 : 06] And he fixes their eyes upon the nations. And it's almost as though the Lord says to him, I'm doing something that you will not believe even if I told you.

I am raising up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians. I'm not blind Habakkuk. I've seen everything that's been going on within my church and I will not let evil go unpunished.

I am raising up a war machine, a ruthless and impetuous superpower and it's coming straight for you.

They will sweep across the whole earth brutally invading and seizing countries, capturing and destroying people. They are rightly feared and dreaded. They have no morality.

They know of no Geneva Convention. They do not know me or my law and so they know nothing of love and mercy. They are a law unto themselves. And the end of verse 6, the language there about seizing dwellings not their own, that would have been very familiar biblical language to Habakkuk and Israel because it's the same terminology that was used to describe the conquest of the promised land back in the book of Deuteronomy.

[13 : 17] See what the Lord's saying here? He's saying Judah has become like the Canaanites and just as the land was seized from the Canaanites in the past, now it's Judah's turn to have the land seized from then by these Chaldean killers.

And from verse 8 to 11, the Lord describes his war machine in terrifying detail. It is ferocious, it is fast and it is fatal.

It's almost like the ultimate predator. Swifter than a leopard, fiercer than a wolf pack, as powerful as a herd of horses, they will swoop down upon Judah and snatch them as though an eagle swooping down upon its prey.

No king or man-made defense can possibly withstand their power. Anything in this war machine's path will be swept away like sand in a hurricane.

Verse 2 to 3 of chapter 1 tells us that God's people had been filling the land with violence. Well, now the Lord is going to give them more. He's going to give them what they want because verse 9, the Babylonians are bent on violence.

[14:28] They love it. They live for it. Their own God is their strength and they love nothing more than seeing their own God in action which of course can only mean torturous pain for all those who get in their way.

I'd just say if you're sitting there right now and you're thinking this is horrendous, then you're right. It is horrendous. That's the point. But please do not miss the passage.

The shock of the passage is this. This is the Lord's doing. The Babylonians are this way because the Lord has raised them up for this purpose. He says to Habakkuk, their destructive success and their carnage, it is my will, my doing and my plan.

I am raising them up and I'm setting them upon my people, Judah. They're coming. Well, how does Habakkuk respond to the news?

Well, firstly, notice that he responds by faith and submission. Please look at verse 12. Are you not from everlasting? O Lord, my God, my Holy One, we shall not die.

[15:40] O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. So Habakkuk will bring another perplexing concern to the Lord in just a moment.

But before he voices his protest, he voices praise. He restates what he knows to be true about God back to God. So he says, you are the eternal God and you are my God.

You're the personal God of all those who trust you and you are the Lord, Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel. You're the God who's totally faithful to the covenant promises that you made to Abraham that through his descendants you will bless all the nations of the world.

I take it that's why Habakkuk can so confidently say what he does in verse 12. We shall not die.

He's saying to the Lord, you will not destroy your people completely as that would mean destroying your covenant promises.

Whatever lies ahead for us, as horrible as it is, will not be total divorce. It will be discipline. My Lord, I accept that you have appointed these Babylonian brutes to be your instrument of judgment.

[16:48] They will chastise your church as you have ordained. So Habakkuk responds to the Lord by faith. But just notice it's still an utterly perplexed faith.

He's totally baffled at what he's heard. And again, he struggles to reconcile what he knows to be true about God with his current experience of God.

They're at loggerheads with one another. Please look at verse 13. He says, you who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you then idly look at traitors?

Do you hear the conflict that's going on within his heart? He knows that God is utterly holy, utterly set apart from all evil. God is light. In him there's no darkness whatsoever.

He can't even look upon evil. It sickens him so much. So why then is the Lord tolerating and using the wicked Babylonians as his instrument of judgment?

[17:49] This seems to have taken a total sledgehammer to his heart. And he carries on in verse 13. Why are you silent while the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

Habakkuk knows that the Lord is totally just. So why then is the Lord using extremely wicked people to punish those who are less wicked? Just put up your hands a random question for you.

Just put up your hand if you have your milk delivered. Does anyone still have their milk delivered? No? I don't think anyone has their milk. Oh, you do. I guess you do. No, okay. Just imagine for a minute you have your milk delivered.

Okay? And all the people on your street. But there is a problem. You have a milk thief. And he's on the loose. And every morning after the milkman is delivered you and your neighbours you fling open your doors to welcome in the new day.

You optimistic people. And you go out and you look at your milk bottles but you're alarmed because some of them are missing. Someone has come along and nabbed them. Well just imagine if you and your neighbours on your street all got together and you went into the roughest part of Glasgow and you hired the brutalest most notorious street gang of thugs to come and sort out your milk thief.

[19:10] And they say yes. What do you think would happen? Well the answer is they sort out your milk thief. But the trouble is they end up killing most of your neighbours as well at the same time.

You would never do that. That's just bonkers isn't it? You would never do that. At least I hope you wouldn't. And yet that is what Habakkuk thinks of the Lord's plan. Have you got this right Lord?

Are you sure about this? Lord your cure seems far worse than the disease. And from verse 14 to 16 Habakkuk uses a gripping metaphor to describe the Lord's plan.

He says Lord it's as though you've turned all the people of the world into helpless little fish with no one to defend them. And at the same time you've raised up the nation of Babylon to be the ultimate successful fisherman.

He's going to scoop up nations as easily as a fisherman scoops up fish with his dragnet along the bottom of the ocean. He's going to pull up enormous catches of fish and he's going to feast upon these people.

[20 : 17] He's puffed up with pride this fisherman and he knows nothing of the true God the true sovereign source of all his successful catches and instead he's going to worship his own resources and abilities for by them he lives in luxury.

And in verse 17 I think it's really Habakkuk at his most boldest. He says Is Babylon then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?

He's saying to the Lord are you going to let them do this again and again and never stop them? Are you never going to hold them to account for what they've done? Will you forever turn a blind eye to their atrocious war crimes and their holocausts?

Well Habakkuk then ends his response to the Lord in the same way that he started it in verse 12 which is by faith. Please look at chapter 2 verse 1 He says I will stand at my watch post and station myself on the tower and look to see what he will say to me and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

I think this is a figurative way of saying that he will wait with great expectation and eagerness to hear from the Lord. I'm sure you know that the watch posts or the ramparts were the highest places in the city where soldiers would be stationed to watch the horizon for an oncoming army or a herald of some sort, a messenger.

[21 : 45] And so that's what Habakkuk is saying. He's not literally going to go up onto the watchtower but rather in his heart he will diligently be on watch eagerly waiting for the Lord to respond to his perplexing concern.

I think it's also a statement of praise because he's confessing that the answer he's looking for is only found in the rich wisdom and understanding of the Lord which is so far above him he can ascend even to the highest point of the city and still not be high enough.

He needs the Lord to condescend to come down to him and reveal the answer that he's looking for that can settle his perplexed faith. And so he waits.

And so must we until next Sunday evening where God willing if you come back we will look at the next part of the dialogue. But with the remainder of our time this evening let's ask the question so what?

What does this mean for our lives today as the people of God? And let me just say there are many things you could learn from this rich book and we're just scratching the surface tonight but I want us to focus on two things.

[22 : 58] Two teaching headings and I'm very sorry these teaching headings aren't very pithy and there's no alliteration but hopefully you'll still be able to remember them. The first lesson is this.

This is what we learn. Don't be surprised if the Lord uses our enemies to discipline us. Don't be surprised if the Lord uses our enemies to discipline us.

We have the same God as Habakkuk. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. And if our God used his enemies to discipline his people back then then he will still do the same in our time.

You might be sitting there thinking as many do at this point ah well come on we live this side of the cross. Well what difference does that make? If God's people slip into complacency and sin then do you really think that the Lord will sit back and idly turn a blind eye?

We've got a remix. Listen to David Jackman listen to David Jackman he says this suppose for a moment we are part of a church that is under judgment because of its rebellion would it then be so inconceivable that God would use the greatest enemies of the gospel false religion pagan immorality powerful commercial or media forces to overrun his people in order to humble us and to bring us truly to our knees?

[24 : 26] Might it not be that the disappointments and the difficulties that we face which we call our enemies are in God's hands his agents to deepen and ultimately to renew our faith painful though it may seem at the present could that be so?

Is God's hand really in all these things all of the time even when things seem to be worse than better? Now friends don't mishear me I am not saying that every time a church suffers it's because

it's under discipline or that the suffering has come about as a direct result of sin no the Bible actually gives lots of carefully nuanced ideas and truths and reasons for why the church suffers but as we listen to the Lord's words to Habakkuk we can't escape the fact that this is clearly one reason for why we suffer as believers I just say it might just be possible that this has kicked up major issues and challenges for you and what you know to be true about God who he is and how he works but we need to take it seriously and if the God that you believe in doesn't match up with the God revealed in Habakkuk then serious changes must be made in your belief system and in your heart don't be surprised if the Lord uses our enemies to discipline us he did it back then and he could and he does do the same today that's the first lesson the second lesson don't be afraid to pray about your perplexing concerns don't be afraid to pray about your perplexing concerns if you're like me then the first time you read this book and listened to Habakkuk you were really surprised even shocked just how bold he is before God you may have been thinking is Habakkuk actually right for praying like this and you know some commentators go down this line some commentators rip Habakkuk to shreds he's a naughty man a bad man he's far too forward in the way he spoke to God in fact I came across one writer who even compared Habakkuk to the atheist Stephen Fry who once infamously went on the TV and raged against the God he doesn't believe in but that's just ridiculous Habakkuk is no atheist in fact I think Habakkuk is a model believer and you know what I am so thankful for the way that he prays in this book nowhere in the text does he get a telling off for being perplexed or for being honest about not having all the answers in fact just the opposite is true isn't it the Lord graciously meets his servant in his perplexity and confusion if that isn't enough to convince you then just remember that Habakkuk isn't the only one in the scriptures to cry out how long think of Matthew chapter 17 where the Lord Jesus himself cries out exactly the same thing do you remember when faced with the deficiency amongst the people of God in his day he cries out how long how long am I to put up with you and then there's a scene also depicted in Revelation chapter 6 where we're told that even the saints who are currently with the Lord Jesus in a state of perfection even the perfected saints in heaven are crying out oh Lord how long as they long for the righteous judgment of God to fall on those who persecute the church so I think it's clear Habakkuk is not wrong for being so honest with God about it's perplexity and confusion I think sadly that's the impression that we can often get from others or that we can actually give off to others is the fact that to belong to God's people you've got to have all the answers there's no room for being perplexed in the Christian life I think that's especially true of those who have had the privilege of going through some sort of ministry training if you've had ministry training of some sort maybe if you've been through Cornhill or released the word training or being a home group leader training I don't know any sorts of training then you need to be careful that when you seek to speak the truth and love to people and help them in their perplexities you don't undermine them and make them feel guilty for being confused or wrestling with things in the Christian life that's a healthy part of a life of faith in fact do you know I can think of a few things more annoying than when you're in the thick of it some spiritual know-it-all comes up to you and shoves some kind of wise soundbite in your face makes you feel like a total idiot for feeling perplexed well Habakkuk is refreshingly different he is a bold believer who's honest with his God and you know what isn't it wonderful that you and I can do the same today Calvin says this about Habakkuk he says if it be objected that the prophet exceeded moderation the obvious answer is this that though he freely pours forth his feelings there was nothing wrong in this before God at least nothing wrong was imputed to him but what reason do we pray but that each of us may unburden our cares our griefs and anxieties by pouring them into the bosom of our

[29 : 52] God since then God allows us to deal so familiarly with him nothing wrong ought to be ascribed to our prayers when we freely pour out our feelings provided the bridle of faith keeps us always within due limits as was the case with Habakkuk there will be times in the Christian life when you feel like you are in a slimy pit times when you are so perplexed because your current experience of God is at loggerheads with what you know to be true of him and you will feel utterly broken and full of pain if that hasn't happened to you already then get ready that's why God has given us this book of Habakkuk I believe because Habakkuk is a model for how suffering believers should pray when I was younger I was taught to pray following the axe pattern I wonder if you know the one I mean praying a neat order for things adoration confession thanksgiving supplication that's a good model nothing wrong with that but there are times in life when things aren't as neat as that there's times in life when neat routines need to be smashed and in your pain all that you can do is

just cry out to

God cry out to your Lord who loves you and having done that what are you then to do well like Habakkuk we are to humbly seek understanding from the Lord get up on the watchtower and ready to listen and of course the equivalent for us today under the new covenant is to diligently and prayerfully study the Bible in many ways we have it so much better than Habakkuk because we have a complete and finished word of God everything that we need is in here it's been revealed to us all the wisdom that can help us walk through sufferings well our time is gone and we will return to the perplexed prophet next Sunday but until then let's pray for one another and pray for ourselves that we will remember these two precious lessons number one don't be surprised if the Lord uses our enemies to discipline us and number two don't be afraid to pray about your perplexing concerns let's be quiet for a moment to respond to

God's word together and then I'll pray heavenly father we confess that your thoughts are not our thoughts you are not a big man you're not just a bigger version of us you are the maker and sustainer of the universe God almighty from everlasting and we are mere creatures of dust and sinful creatures at that and so we know that your ways will often astound and perplex us there will be many times in our lives when we have no idea what is going on and what you are doing but we thank you that even in those moments of perplexity we can trust you and bring all of our deep concerns and griefs to you in prayer through your spirit and your son help us to follow the model example of your servant

Habakkuk not to be afraid of crying out but instead to honestly come before you and then to diligently seek your wisdom and your understanding from your word we thank you that you are the God who graciously meets us in our weaknesses and struggles you are the God who has redeemed us and given us the great privilege of pouring out our concerns into your bosom so help us we pray to remember these precious lessons from Habakkuk we pray all this in Christ's name Amen