

The Prayer that the Righteous Pray (1)

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Preacher: Philip Copeland

[0 : 00] We're turning to the Bibles now, to Habakkuk, and you will find that in the church Bibles, if you have one of those, on page 786, near the end of the Old Testament, just one of those little prophets that hides, and Habakkuk hides between Nahum and Zephaniah, and you can miss him, but he's well worth paying attention to.

And Phil has been leading us through this, we're looking tonight at chapter 3, or most of it, I'm going to read chapter 3, verse 1 to 15. A prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, according to Shigionah.
O Lord, I've heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years, revive it. In the midst of the years, make it known.

In wrath, remember mercy. God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His splendor crowned the heavens.

The earth was full of his praise. His brightness was like the light. Rays flashed from his hand. And there he veiled his power. Before him went pestilence, and plague followed at his heels.

[1 : 22] He stood and measured the earth. He looked and shook the nations. And then the eternal mountains were scattered. The everlasting hills sank low.

His were the everlasting ways. I saw the tents of Kushan in affliction. The curtains of the land of Midian did tremble. Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord?

Was your anger against the rivers, or your indignation against the sea, when you rode on your horses on your chariot of salvation? You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows.

You split the earth with rivers. The mountains saw you and writhed. The raging waters swept on. The deep gave forth its voice.

It lifted its hands on high. The sun and the moon stood still in their place, at the light of your arrows as they sped, as the flesh of your glittering spear.

[2 : 21] You marched through the earth in fury. You threshed the nations in anger. You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed.

You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. You pierced with his own arrows the heads of his warriors, who came like a whirlwind to scatter me, rejoicing as if to devour the poor in secret.

You trampled the sea with your horses, the surging of mighty waters. I hear, and my body trembles. My lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters into my bones. My legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invaded us.

Amen. May God bless to us his word. Good evening. Please do turn in your Bibles to Habakkuk chapter 3.

[3 : 35] And you'll find that on page 786 of our church Bibles. 786. Habakkuk chapter 3, which is really all about the prayer that the righteous pray.

The prayer that the righteous pray. Before we come to look at this prayer, let's pray. Proverbs 2 says that the Lord gives wisdom from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you give us, your people, all of the wisdom, knowledge, and understanding that we need for the life of faith in these last days.

Through this, your precious and holy word. We pray now that by the power of your Holy Spirit, you would use Habakkuk chapter 3 to teach us, rebuke us, correct us, and train us in righteousness.

In Christ's name we pray all these things. Amen. Songs can be extremely powerful things, can't they? We can see that from the history books. Just think of the songs that were sung during World War II.

[4 : 43] Songs that inspired the hearts of the nation to persevere, to fight on, and to envision a day of future victory. Or as we mentioned last week, think of the chants that are sung at sporting matches, maybe by rugby or football fans, when they sing to spur on their team.

It can lift the performance of the players and put off the opposition. I think it's a fair assessment to say that the majority of people actually believe the things that they sing in our culture today. Think of modern day pop culture and the way in which the values and world views expressed in the latest hit singles influence and shape the way people live their lives and their behavior. And the church is no exception to this sort of thing. Most of us, if we're honest, actually take a lot of our doctrine from what we sing.

That's why it's so important that we don't sing drivel, isn't it? So songs are powerful and the songs of the Bible are no exception. God has given us in his book his songs so that when we hear them, it will grip not just our minds but also our emotions.

[5 : 54] Every part of us is to be touched and affected and brought into conformity with his will. Now why did I tell you all of that? Well, because Habakkuk chapter 3 is a song, one of God's songs.

The prophet is singing a prayer to the Lord and you will have noticed that this song was also written for the people of God to sing in their corporate worship. That's clear from the musical directions. Just look at verse 1. According to Shigianoth, that's a musical term. It's also used at the beginning of Psalm 7 and we don't know precisely what it means but most of the commentators assume that it's maybe marking out some sort of an instrument to be used on the name of a tune that was to be used in the singing of this psalm.

Then look at verse 19 at the end. More musical instruction to the choir master with stringed instruments. And as you will have noticed earlier when it was being read through, you will notice there were three breaks in the song marked out by this word Selah.

Verse 3, verse 9, and verse 13. And again, we don't precisely know what these mean but it's most likely marking a change in tempo or perhaps in the tone of how this was to be sung.

[7 : 10] So this is a song of Habakkuk but it's also a song for the people of God and it is a beautiful response of faith and submission to the report of the Lord's work that Habakkuk had just received.

Just look at verse 1 where he says, O Lord, I have heard a report of you and your work. O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years, revive it.

Do as you say, Lord. In the midst of your years, make it known in wrath, remember mercy. And you might be thinking, well, what is the report that Habakkuk has just heard?

Well, let me quickly remind you. We remember from the past two weeks we have witnessed an intense dialogue happening between the Lord and his prophet Habakkuk. And in chapter 1, Habakkuk brought his first perplexing concern to the Lord saying, O Lord, how long are you going to let the members of your Old Testament church get away with the flagrant rebellion that they are committing against you?

They're dragging your precious name through the mud. They are not living as lights to the Gentiles. They're actually blaspheming your name amongst the Gentiles.

[8 : 24] They've nullified your law of life and they're oppressing the righteous. That's the true remnant of faith within the land. And Lord, you don't seem to care.

How long will you sit there and make me look at all of this every day? Won't you remember your covenant promises and deal with this as you've said?

And the Lord responds with a shocking answer in chapter 1, verse 5. He says, Habakkuk, I'm not blind and I've not been idle. I've seen everything that's been going on amongst my Old Testament church and I'm raising up the Babylonians to be my war machine.

This army of idolatrous killers, they're my chosen instrument of judgment for disciplining my rebellious church. They will sweep across the globe in fury. They will seize nations and devour people and they are headed straight for you.

Straight for Judah. But that answer to prayer doesn't help Habakkuk at all because he responds to the Lord with an even greater perplexing concern. He says, Oh Lord, I accept your plan but I just don't get it.

[9 : 36] You are holy so then how can you tolerate let alone use such evil people? And you are just. So how then can you use extremely wicked people, the Babylonians, to punish those who are less wicked?

Will you let Babylon do this forever and ever? Will you never hold them to account for their atrocious war crimes and holocausts? And what about us, the righteous, the remnant people of faith?

Is it all over for us? Will you never vindicate us? As we saw last week in chapter 2, the Lord responds by saying, A day is coming, Habakkuk, when I will fill the earth with the knowledge of my glory and on that day I will hold Babylon to account.

On that day I will publicly humiliate and punish the proud. Babylon and all those who've lived by the same spirit and heart attitude as Babylon, they will get their comeuppance.

I will dish out retributive justice. So to put it bluntly, Habakkuk has heard that the Lord is going to judge everyone. The Lord is going to judge his own people, the household of faith first, and then the rest of the world will be judged.

[10:52] And the only hope in the face of the coming judgment is chapter 2, verse 4, where the Lord says, the righteous, the righteous shall live by his faith.

In other words, all those who humbly respond to the word of God by the obedience of faith, all those who look to the Lord for life and who stake their all upon the Lord's promises, they will live through the wrath to come.

The Lord will vindicate his people and give them justice in the end. And so in our passage this evening, having listened to all of that, the word of the Lord, the prophet is no longer full of perplexing concern, but now he's full of praise and certainty and assurance and hope.

So much so that he bursts out into this beautiful prayer song to the Lord whom he fears. And so Habakkuk is really being held up as a model example of the type of faith described in chapter 2, verse 4.

You want to know what real faith sounds like? Well, listen to Habakkuk. Here it is here. It is faith and trust in the Lord that will stake its everything upon what God has said, even when the enemy is severely sifting the church and oppressing the people of God.

[12:11] And you know, each one of us today, everyone today is invited to, as it were, sing this song with Habakkuk in our hearts to follow his example and live the same life of faith and contentment in the Lord.

Now, I'd like us to look at this prayer song under two sections, verse 1 to 15, and we'll look at that this week, and next week, God willing, we'll look at the second half, verse 16 to 19.

But let's look at this half of the prayer song, and Habakkuk is really inviting us all to sing along with him in our hearts and remember the God who comes.

Remember the God who comes. Please look at verse 3, the first two words. What does he say? God came. In this section of his prayer song, Habakkuk looks back to the ways in which the Lord came to save his people in the past, and he does that in order to get a glimpse of what the Lord will do in the future.

In order to get a glimpse of the Lord's final judgment on history, Habakkuk looks back to the Lord's former judgments in history. And every believer can do the same today.

[13:24] Each time we open up our Bibles and read about the Lord coming to his people to deliver them from the enemy in the past, it's a little preview, a foretaste of what will happen on the last day.

Let me illustrate this to you. When I was a little boy, my mum would make some fantastic cakes. And as you can probably tell, she made quite a lot of fantastic cakes. She still does.

She still makes lovely cakes because she's in this room tonight, but there we go. But when I was younger, whenever we had guests around at the weekend, my mum would be busy earlier on in the day, and she would start, say, probably about 10 a.m.

She would be making up a cake mix, and she would do her work, and at about 12 p.m., the cake would be finished. It would be ready. And I'd immediately go, oh, I want some of that. It looks amazing.

Give me it. But there was a problem because the cake had been hidden away at that point and wouldn't come out until the appointed time, which was about 8 o'clock that night. How was I going to wait?

[14:25] How was I going to live in light and wait patiently for the final appearing of the beautiful cake that was to come? What was I going to do? Well, my mum, being such a kind lady, she let me lick the spoon that had the cake mix on it.

Now, what was on the spoon was not the final cake, but it was made of the same stuff as the final cake. So as I licked that, it would help me wait patiently for the final appearing of that wonderful cake that was to come.

It was made of the same stuff. Now, that's what it's like for the people of God. When we read about the Lord's great acts of salvation in the past, the spiritual warfare we'd read in the Old Testament, as I said last week, you shouldn't be embarrassed by that because it is a glorious foretaste of what will happen when the Lord comes in his final victory.

These little deliverances in the past are made of the same stuff as what will happen on the last day. And that is why Habakkuk spends the majority of his prayer not talking about himself, but remembering what the Lord has done for his people.

And I just say, if you want to be miserable in the Christian life and seriously miserable, then just do the opposite of what Habakkuk does here. Pray lots and lots about yourself and what you will do for God and very little about what he has done for his people.

[15:49] And I guarantee you it won't be long before you are downcast and miserable. Well, let's briefly draw out three specific details, three truths that Habakkuk chooses to remember about the Lord in his prayer song.

Firstly, he remembers that the Lord has been terrifyingly powerful. The Lord, when he appeared in the past, was terrifyingly powerful.

Look again at verse three. God came from Teman and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His splendor covered the heavens and the earth was full of his praise.

His brightness was like the light. Rays flashed from his hand. And there he veiled his power. And this is probably most definitely referring back to the Lord's movements just after the Exodus when he led his people from Mount Sinai through Teman, which was a region associated with Edom, through the wilderness and to the promised land.

And you remember what happened. Those of you, I think, who've been at Release the Word this year have been studying the Exodus. You remember what happened when the Lord appeared in that nightmarish manifestation in Exodus 19.

[17:02] There was smoke, fire, thunder, lightning, trumpet blasts that grew louder and louder. All those who witnessed it trembled with fear when they were faced by the Lord's power.

And as verse 4 says, it was just a veiled power. Goodness knows what would have happened to them if it weren't veiled. I just say, I think there is a danger today that we may be desensitized to how mind-blowing and shocking these images are because we're so used to watching TV programs that have all sorts of special effects, about people doing all sorts of magnificent things, a lot of superhero films, for example.

But just think about how terrifying it would have been for a citizen living in ancient Judah to hear about the one who's so powerful that when he appears, his splendor just engulfs the sky and blaze of light flash out from the palms of his hands.

And look at verse 6. When the Lord comes near, we're told that the very core of the earth is shaken. Not even the eternal mountains are safe. That's a figurative way in verse 6 there about speaking about the foundations of the earth that have stood firm since creation.

The Lord is so powerful that as he walks the earth past these ancient mountains, these ancient symbols of stability, the Lord just thrashes them with his hand, just almost like you would if you were on the beach and you thrashed through a sandcastle.

[18:30] That's how powerful the Lord is. The very core of the earth is shaken. And when the nations witnessed the Lord's power in the past, they were petrified. Just look at verse 7.

I saw the tents of cushion in affliction, and the curtains of Midian did tremble. Now why does he mention these two nations? Well, most commentators agree that he refers to Cushion and Midian because they were the first two pagan nations that the Lord raised up back in the book of Judges to punish his rebellious people.

In other words, the Lord raised up Cushion and Midian for the same purpose that he was about to raise up Babylon. And what happened to Cushion and Midian once the Lord had finished using them to discipline his people?

Answer, they experienced the Lord's terrifying power channeled through one of the anointed judges that the Lord had raised up. So Habakkuk remembers what the Lord did to those two nations because they are little previews of what the Lord was going to do to Babylon shortly in his time.

Yes, the Lord will use Babylon to punish his people for a period. But when the Lord is finished with Babylon, he will unleash his power upon them and it is a terrifying power.

[19 : 49] So that's the first thing that Habakkuk remembers in his prayer song. The Lord is terrifyingly powerful. The second thing he remembers is this. The Lord has a ferocious arsenal.

The Lord has a ferocious arsenal. The Lord even uses the created order as his weaponry. Look at verse 5. Habakkuk says that when the Lord walked in judgment in the past, he sent pestilence to go ahead of him to prepare for his arrival.

And as he'd come through and faced the enemy, what followed him? The answer is the plague. It would spread over any survivors of the enemies of God's people. And these were the very things that the Lord brought upon Egypt, wasn't it?

These are two of the things in the Lord's ferocious weaponry that wreaked havoc upon all those who'd tormented his people for so long. And if we were to look with more time at all the other details in this section, we're told that the waters, the sea, the earth, the deep, the lightning, they're all described here as things which the Lord at his appearing has used as weapons against the foe. Especially verse 8. It seems to be a deliberate allusion to the Red Sea and the way in which the Lord sovereignly split it and used it to wipe out Egypt and Pharaoh.

[21 : 08] And then just look at verse 11. The sun and the moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped at the flash of your glittering spear.

If you knew your Bible as Habakkuk does, then you would see that he is referring to Joshua chapter 10. In Joshua chapter 10, we're told that five kings of the Amorites, the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, the king of Eglon, all these powers joined together as one army.

And what happened? They come to face the people of God and Joshua prays to the Lord for help and the Lord replies by saying, I, I have given them into your hand. And you remember, those of you who know that book well, that the Lord caused the enemies to turn on each other.

And what did the Lord do? The text says he got massive hailstones from heaven and he thrashed them down upon the heads of the enemy and he killed them. He shot to kill.

And the Lord held the sun and the moon in the sky supernaturally to keep the light for his people to go. And as the enemies were fleeing from his people, they had all the light that they needed to carry out their vengeance upon those who had come to oppress them.

[22 : 25] That's what Habakkuk is remembering here. The Lord has a ferocious arsenal at his disposal. Back in Habakkuk 1, you'll remember in verse 14 to 16, Habakkuk described Babylon as like a top fisherman whose catch is the people of the nations.

Well, Babylon is nothing compared to the Lord. There is no power on earth, no enemy of the people of God and of the gospel that is any match for our Lord, for the God who has called us to be part of his people.

He is the ultimate warrior who has a ferocious arsenal. The third thing that Habakkuk chooses to remember about the Lord in his prayer is this, the Lord has appeared time and again and he has crushed the head of the enemy.

Please look at verse 13. You went out for the salvation of your people, for the salvation of your anointed. You crushed the head of the house of the wicked, laying him bare from thigh to neck. Here is a verse for the people of God to sing at the top of their lungs. The fact that in the past the Lord has utterly humiliated his enemy, crushing the head of their king.

[23 : 40] That little detail there about laying him bare from thigh to neck is hard to translate but it seems to have been a humiliating act that one king would carry out upon another king that had been defeated.

And Habakkuk is longing for the day when the Lord will do this to the king of Babylon. But of course you cannot miss the clear allusion to Genesis 3 where the Lord promised to crush the head of the enemy, the one who lies behind the king of Babylon, Satan himself.

It's like that again when we read all the way through the Bible. Every time you see the Lord's people crushing a pharaoh or crushing a Goliath, it's assurance that one day the one who is behind Pharaoh and behind Goliath, Satan himself, will meet the same humiliating end from the Lord.

By the way, don't miss what this teaches us about the nature of salvation. Salvation for God's people always means destruction for their enemies at the same time.

You can't have one without the other. That's always the case in what the Bible means by salvation. It's the time when God's wrath and his mercy meet. And he shows his wrath by destroying his enemy.

[24 : 58] But also in the same action, he shows his mercy in protecting and liberating his people. And just notice the end of verse 13. You pierced his own arrows, the heads of his warriors.

Listen to old Palmer Robertson on this little point. He says this, In his distinctive way of working, the Lord sees to it that the enemies of his people suffer from the severest of humiliations.

They destroy themselves with their own weapons. Often God's people find themselves severely disturbed because they see no visible power as strong as their enemies.

But Habakkuk encourages the faithful to assume a strange perspective. They must look at the strength of the enemy as the very source of their own protection.

The stronger the enemy, the more sure of its own self-destruction. For as the Lord sovereignly raises up powers and brings them down again, he turns the strength of the enemy against itself.

[26 : 08] Think of some examples. Haman hangs on his own gallows. Daniel's adversaries perish in the very den of lions into which they had cast him.

Or as Psalm 7 says, He who digs a pit to entrap the righteous falls into that same pit that he has made. It's a very strange principle for us to get our head around.

But Habakkuk is saying rather than being terrified at the strength of our enemies, God's people ought to rest confidently in the assurance that the strength of the enemy's power only displays their capacity to destroy themselves.

So Habakkuk remembers the Lord who comes in his prayer. The Lord is terrifyingly powerful, the Lord has a ferocious arsenal, and the Lord has time and again crushed the head of the enemy, even using the enemy's own attack against itself.

And Habakkuk sings about these truths so that they will grip his mind and his emotions, and so that he will have a glimpse of the future, helping him to carry on living in the now, in the present age, for the glory of God under Babylonian oppression.

[27 : 21] And brothers and sisters, we must do the same. In order for us to be assured of the Lord's coming, we too must look back and see our mighty warrior Lord in action.

But when we look back from our place in salvation history, we have such a better view than Habakkuk could ever have imagined. For when we look back, we don't just see the majestic deliverances of the Old Testament.

We do see them, but we can look back and see the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. We can look back to the time when all was accomplished for the kingdom of God.

We can look back and we can remember the cross where God took the ultimate attack of the enemy, the crucifixion of the Son of God, and turned that attack back upon the enemy and massively backfired for Satan, didn't it?

The cross is the ultimate place where God's wrath and mercy met when the Son of God paid the price for sin and so at the same time as the Apostle Paul says, disarmed and triumphed over the demonic rulers and authorities and put them to open shame.

[28 : 33] We look back and see the moment when Satan was struck the death blow that guarantees that his ultimate end will soon come. A few years ago, I remember listening to David Jackman and he was addressing a church down south and he said something along the lines of this, if you are a Christian who is full of despair and panic by the state of the world around you, then just ask yourself this, how many minutes of your week do you spend reading the newspapers and watching the news, especially if you are retired?

Could it be that you are downcast with despair in your Christian life because you spend more time listening to the voice of the world as opposed to listening to the voice of the Lord, reminding yourself of who he is, what he has done and what he will do in the days to come?

Struggling Christians who are in a state of exile away from earth, from their home in heaven, who are surrounded by those who live by the spirit of Babylon, they need to remember these things.

We need to pray about these things and we need to sing about these things. If you are here and if you are despairing, then it might just be that you've forgotten how terrifyingly powerful your Lord is.

What a ferocious arsenal he's got and how he has crushed the head of the enemy in the past and how he will do in the future. This is our God.

[30 : 08] This is your God that we're reading about here. So Habakkuk says to us all, remember him. Sing this prayer song that I have written in your hearts.

Let it delight your soul and it will help you persevere. Let's be quiet for a moment to respond to the Lord's word in our own hearts and then I'll pray.

Gracious God, we thank you that your word records for us your mighty acts and deeds that you have done in history so that we can look back and by the power of your Holy Spirit get a glimpse of what is to come when on the last day the Lord Jesus will appear.

The earth will be filled with the knowledge of your glory. Satan and his kingdom will get their final comeuppance. So help us, Lord, to follow the model example of your servant Habakkuk, to fear you and to remember you in our prayers and in our daily lives so that when we experience attacks of the evil one we might stand firm and not be shaken.

Thank you that you are our mighty warrior who through the cross and resurrection has won victory over all of our foes. O Lord, we thank you that by your grace you have called us to share in this great victory through union with your precious Son.

[31 : 41] Help us to delight in these things above all. We pray this in his precious name. Amen. Amen. Amen.