

1. A Puzzling Silence

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 01] Well friends, you may have spotted the figure of Bob Files sitting up here preparing to preach to us and I'm delighted to be able to introduce him to you. Many of you will have come across Bob and perhaps met him in the past but others won't have done.

Bob comes across every Wednesday from Edinburgh to help us at the Cornhill training course just up the road. So he and I are colleagues in that sense and it's a joyful collaboration that we have.

Bob works as the warden or director. Are you warden or director Bob? Or both? He's the director but would like to be the warden of Rutherford House in Edinburgh which as you know is a publishing house and has a number of different ministries and he's in charge of all that.

But we do enjoy having him across to Glasgow once a week on a Wednesday. So Bob thank you so much for your willingness to be with us. Bob is to be with us for this Wednesday lunchtime service for the next four weeks including today so we have much good stuff to look forward to from the prophet Habakkuk.

So I'll ask you to come and read to us brother and then speak if you will. Thank you. Well thank you very much Edward and it's good to be with you and I look forward to these four sessions.

[1 : 09] We're going to be looking at this prophet whose name is difficult to pronounce. Edward called him Habakkuk. Some people call him Habakkuk. If anyone tells you they know the right way don't believe them.

No one actually knows. The important thing with this is with all Old Testament names it's pronounced them confidently. But no one else knows either. But this prophet, whatever he was called, has a hugely important message and we're going to look at it under the general title of Is God still in control?

In this puzzling world we live in, in this difficult and perplexing time Is God still in control? And we're going to read today verses 1-11 of chapter 1 which is on page 785.

Verse 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 paralysed And justice never goes forth For the wicked surround the righteous So justice goes forth perverted Look among the nations and see 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 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

[3 : 25] At kings they scoff And at rulers they laugh They laugh at every fortress Or they pile up earth and take it Then they sweep by like a wind And go on Guilty men Whose own might Is their God And may God speak to us Through this passage From his word There are moments Aren't there In life When something happens Which changes everything We can never look at things In quite the same way again And when these incidents take place We can usually remember Where we were At that particular time What we were doing The older among you will remember Probably still What you were doing When President Kennedy Was assassinated in 1963 And when I mention the words 9-11 Most of us Can remember Where we were And how we heard

That the Twin Towers Had been destroyed And how suddenly The prospect of global terrorism Of terrorists Taking over the whole world And destroying so much Of civilization Became a terrifying reality Now that's the kind of situation That the prophet Habakkuk faces I'm not sure What I'm going to call this guy I'm sometimes going to call him Habakkuk And sometimes Bacchuk Maybe we'll just call him H This is the kind of situation He faces God's people In Jerusalem Are about to be Taken into exile The unthinkable Is going to happen The temple Of God Is going to be Burned down The city of Jerusalem Is going to be destroyed Raised to the ground And their long And glorious history Is going to come To an end And the question That they're asking Is Is God In control And in particular In this first section Which I've called The puzzling silence

The question is Why is God Not doing anything Now the prophet Is a small one But it's a big message He has The word that he's used Is oracle Or burden He has something That he has to get Off his chest If Haricot Doesn't say this He's not going to be able To contain himself Something important To say And he is saying That I saw This oracle Now the task Of the prophet Is to open People's eyes To reality The poet T.S. Eliot Said Humankind Cannot bear Too much reality Now the prophet Is not going to allow us Not to bear reality The prophet is saying Look This is what it's like In this puzzling world In which we live This is the way To look at it Is God Still in control And the pattern of the book Is quite simple We have Habakkuk's complaint I'm not sure I like the word

Complaint Protest Would be a better word Sometimes Lament Trouble is When we think of lament We think of people Whining Complaining Gurning As they say in Scotland And so on We think of people Making a fuss And moaning This isn't that This is a real protest Habakkuk is puzzled He's desperate He wants an answer So we have his first protest Which we're looking at At the moment In verses 1 to 4 Then we have the Lord's answer Verses 4 to 11 Then we have the second protest Of Habakkuk Followed by the Lord's second answer And finally In chapter 3 We have a prayer A song of worship Which sums it up So let's look then At Habakkuk's protest And the Lord's answer And as we look at Habakkuk's protest He is saying Why is God not intervening There is a puzzle And the puzzle is

God's inactivity Where is God When tragedies happen Somebody A Jewish novelist Wrote a book Where was God In Auschwitz Why did he look on When the gas chambers burned Why did he look on When the pogroms And the terrifying slaughter Of the Jews Took place What was happening Why was he inactive And he uses a phrase Which occurs very often In the Old Testament Particularly in the Psalms Verse 2 How long How long is this going to be And I think you'll agree with me If you're ever in a situation Of great difficulty One of the things That you feel Is it's never going to come to an end It's interesting isn't it Sometimes when you look back On such a period You realise My goodness That was a very short time But when it's happening Lord How long Are you never going to intervene Why does God not answer Many of you will know The Narnia stories

[8 : 28] Of C.S. Lewis One of my favourite books Some of you may know His little book Called A Grief Observed Which he wrote When his wife died One of his last books Lewis was married Late in life He was in his late 50s His wife lived For only three years After they were married And she died of cancer And he writes this terrifying Little book Which is like The prophecy of Habakkuk Like the book of Job Like many of the Laments in the Old Testament He has a vivid picture Of a house A large house Which used to be welcoming The windows Were full of light There was a welcome And that was being welcomed Into the presence of God And he says this Why is it That when you need God most He is least present He talks about The house being shuttered He talks about Coming up to this house Which was so welcoming And the doors slam The bolts jam

And there is a silence A terrifying silence Was there ever anybody there In the house at all Lewis says And that's the problem That many people have When things are tough When things are difficult Where is God?

There is the problem of violence Verses 2 to 3 The grim cycle of violence The inevitable consequence Of turning away from God Read the early chapters of Genesis When sin comes into the world In chapter 3 It's immediately followed by violence In chapter 4 Where we learn The first baby to be born Into the world Was a murderer And that the second baby To be born was his victim As you read on Into the flood story One of the reasons Given for that Is violence Is that a problem In our society As it disintegrates Not just in the inner cities In the despair Of the housing estates Where there's no work No amenities No hope Just grey grinding despair On Newsnight Not so long ago I saw a fascinating But terrifying program About violence In beautiful Cotswold villages Like Morton on Marsh And Borton on the Water The violence there as well The breakdown of civilised behaviour

Problem of violence But there is another problem The problem is Why is God doing nothing? Verse 3 Why do you make me see iniquity? And why do you idly look on wrong?

Is God in control? Indeed is he there at all? That's the problem And the particular experience Becomes a general one The wicked surround the righteous That's the first protest The mystery of God's silence The mystery of God's inactivity Why does God do nothing?

[11 : 18] But the Lord's answer Is an astonishing one Verse 5 Look among the nations and see Wonder and be astounded God gives his first answer And the interesting thing is When God gives his first answer He doesn't dispute Habakkuk's analysis of events He effectively says You're right to see it that way That is the way it is But the point that God makes Is an astonishing one It's not that he is inactive God says I'm not inactive I haven't lost control Indeed events that are already happening Are bringing the answer To your problem Trouble is the answer Seems worse than the problem The cure seems worse than the disease The solution is so terrifying You almost wish you hadn't asked the question So you see in the first protest There's the mystery of God's inactivity Why doesn't he do anything?

Here we have in the Lord's first answer The mystery of God's activity Why does he do what he's doing? And surely we must often feel like this as well There are times When we look out onto the universe We look at We say to the Lord Lord why?

Why are you behaving in this way? The first thing the Lord says Is I'm raising up the Chaldeans Verse 6 This is a name that takes us once again Right back to the beginning of the Bible To the sinister figure of Nimrod And the city of Babylon In many ways you could call the Bible A tale of two cities The tale of Babylon The anti-God forces And the tale of Jerusalem The people of God And what's God saying here?

God is saying None of these great powers in history None of the enemies of my people Actually arise by chance They actually arise because I raised them up It's an astonishing thing God raised up communism God raised up Islam God raised up secularism Why did he do these things?

He did these things To test his people Sometimes to punish them There was the late Lord MacLeod Who said that The Lord raised up communism In order to teach The western church How complacent they were How they thought Everything belonged to them And that's That's very much in line With what Habakkuk Is saying here None of them arise by chance And it's interesting These verses here Verse 5 and 6 These are quoted by Paul In Acts chapter 13 And Paul says This is uniquely shown When Jesus was put to death When Jesus was crucified An awful act An evil act A sinful act And yet God's purpose To save people To bring about his kingdom Nothing happens by chance So what seems the triumph of evil Particularly in the death of Jesus Open the kingdom of heaven

[14 : 23] For all who believe And God is saying I'm raising up these Chaldeans And they are part of the answer Part of my purpose And he goes on to say Really in the second part Of the answer I am lord of the nations Because the fact that God Raises up the Babylonians Doesn't mean He approves of the Babylonians Habakkuk is a beautiful Wonderful poet He uses brilliant imagery here There's a devastating critique Of Babylonian imperialism And militarism Verse 7 They are dreaded and fearsome Their justice and dignity Go forth from themselves Now you see what the Babylonians Are doing They're saying We created ourselves We are God Indeed in verse 11 Guilty men Whose own might Is their God What happens When somebody Rises on the world stage And acts like a dictator What are they saying They're saying

I am God I'm self-sufficient Excuse me I need nobody The one way they never look Is up And God is saying They're going to be judged They imagine They control history If you read in the book of Daniel You'll find that expressed Expressed powerfully There is only one Who rules history And we are told That he does as he pleases With the powers of heaven And the peoples of earth Who can hold back his hand Or say to him What are you doing It applies to the nations Of the world It also applies to the great powers In our world Which aren't always nation states It applies to the great multinationals It applies to the drug barons It applies to the forces Of political correctness Which attack Christian unions And so on All these great anti-God forces Whose own might

Is their God That sums up human rebellion Against God The rebellion right at the beginning If you eat the fruit of this tree You will be like God Knowing good and evil And when you think Of the record of militarism In the century which just passed Think of the two great world wars Think of Rwanda and Bosnia Think of present continuing conditions In Iraq and Afghanistan Violence Bloodshed Militarism Is still with us But it is not an accident When we look at these things We realize that God Is in control Verse 10 At kings they scoff And at rulers they laugh They laugh at every fortress For they pile up earth And take it They think they are in control But they are not Now Just I want to say two things To sum that up then We have got the mystery Of God's inactivity Why doesn't he do something

And then The answer Which is a puzzling one The mystery of God's activity Why does he do What he does Is God not very good at theology Doesn't he understand What things are about And God is saying Habakkuk If you could see the whole picture Then you would see And of course this is Going to be worked out In the rest of the book I think the first thing I'd want to say is There is still mystery The fact that we The fact that through the words Of Habakkuk And other prophets And other scriptures We know that God is in control Still leaves mystery There are still puzzles There are still perplexities We are still We still feel Terribly Terribly Threatened And in a very vulnerable world But the point That God is making Surely Is that one day He will judge The world It's not going to go on Like this forever The ancient world Which Habakkuk Prophesied

And lived Particularly among The Babylonians And others Was a world that believed History was cyclical Good periods Followed bad periods And so on In a kind of Unending pendulum So the second thing Is we must take The long view When we say That Jesus is Lord That's not just A statement of fact That's a statement of faith It doesn't look As if Jesus is Lord Looking around At the world Perhaps looking At the circumstances Of your own life At this very moment It's a statement of faith A statement of worship Say that Jesus is King And when we sing As we did Your kingdom come O God Your rule O Christ Begin We are making The statement That one day Because of His death Resurrection And ascension And His coming To which we look That one day Jesus Christ Will be King So when we ask These questions Why is God Inactive Or even more When we ask the question Why is God Active In ways we find

[19 : 24] Puzzling I believe We are going To find As we explore This little book Some of the answers Coming through And the answer Surely is The other great Old Testament Affirmation of faith In a puzzling Perplexing world In Psalm After Psalm We read this Affirmation of worship The Lord Is King Jesus Is Lord Let's look To His coming Let's pray For His coming And let's work For Him In the middle Of much mystery And perplexity Let's pray He does He pleases With the powers Of heaven And the peoples Of earth Who can say To Him What are you doing God our Father In the midst Of mystery And perplexity Help us To trust in you May the words Jesus is Lord Not simply Be a pious phrase But the whole Dynamic Of our lives Bless us now As we go out

Into the world And about our business And fill our hearts With faith And with love In Jesus name Amen