

4. God will be God

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[0 : 00] Amen, and this is the word of the Lord, and a glorious and wonderful poem it is. There are times in life when two opponents who are totally ill-matched take on each other.

Just imagine Stenhouse Muir taking on Manchester United. There isn't a contest, really, and I apologise if any of you are supporters of Stenhouse Muir, but there is no contest, and that's what it must have seemed like to Habakkuk, the tiny city of Jerusalem in the little province of Judah, cowering in its mountain citadel behind its walls as the huge Babylonian juggernaut rolled over the Middle East.

It reminds me of a story of a group of Christians in Birmingham who were anxious to find a place to meet in, and they discovered a piece of waste ground which no one seemed to want.

They bought it, and they built the little chapel. They were delighted to be there, and to meet together to hear God's word, and to pray, and to praise. In a few days' time, however, they got a letter from John Lewis.

John Lewis had also cast their eyes on that piece of ground, and the letter said something like this, Dear Sirs, we want to buy this piece of ground. We have been here longer than you.

[1 : 25] Sincerely, John Lewis. No contest. Tiny little chapel. Huge, a huge multi-million pound concern. However, a few days later, the top brass of John Lewis also received a letter.

Strangely, it was virtually identical. Dear Sirs, we want to buy the piece of ground. We have been here longer than you. They fell about laughing until they saw the signature.

The signature was Cadbury. They had not realized that behind that little chapel of humble people stood the great Cadbury Empire. Something like that gives us some kind of insight into what Habakkuk must have felt here.

Cowering before the Babylonian juggernaut, seeing that it's no contest at all. God's people are completely overwhelmed. He has this tremendous vision of the Lord God Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Lord of hosts, the God who brought his people out of Israel, the Lord who is in his holy temple.

Perhaps, indeed, this whole dialogue of the prophet and the Lord had taken place in the actual literal temple. But, as I said last week, the temple may be the whole universe itself.

[2 : 38] And God speaks in that temple, and he speaks in the words of a psalm, or words which Habakkuk puts into a psalm. Shagiyonoth, nobody knows what that means, perhaps a musical instrument, perhaps a particular tune, and it's addressed to the choir master.

And in this great psalm, Habakkuk presents the answer to the problem that's been facing him. And first of all, Habakkuk tells us who God is.

Verses 1-7, really. Who God is. Is he a dumb idol? What prophet is an idol? Back in chapter 2, verse 18, when his maker is shaped in a metal image, a teacher of lies.

You see, Habakkuk is asking a more basic question now. Not just, does God answer prayer? But who is God? When you think of it, that's a more fundamental question.

It's not, does he answer prayer? But is he the kind of God? Number one, who will listen to us? And number two, who will do something for us? And in this great poem, one of the peaks of the Old Testament, he tells us in these first seven verses, two things about God.

[3 : 50] The two great twin truths of the Old Testament. First of all, he is the creator. He's not only the God of past memories. O Lord God, I heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I fear.

It can be a mistake. Indeed, it is a mistake to dwell nostalgically on an imagined golden past, and to wish that it would come again. But notice the word he uses.

In the midst of the years, revive your work. What does revive mean? Revive means to breathe life into, and who can do that but the creator himself. We're back in the early chapters of Genesis, are we not?

Where the Lord God breathed life, and the man became a living being. The Lord God said, let there be light, and there was light. Notice verse three, the second part.

His splendor covered the heavens. The earth was full of his praise. His brightness was like the light. Rays flashed from his hand. In other words, Habakkuk is looking into reality.

[4 : 54] What's the most significant thing about this vast universe of ours? It is that God is. God is real. God is living. And Babylon begins to dwindle and disappear.

It's a great juggernaut when looked at from the vantage point of our surroundings. But when you compare it with the creator, there is simply no contest. And notice plague and pestilence go before him, reminding us of how long before God, this God, had destroyed the Egyptian gods, the plagues of Egypt and so on, where he had destroyed the gods of Egypt.

What is Habakkuk saying? Creation is alive with him. And this also doesn't just look back to the Exodus. It looks forward to the final coming, when Jesus Christ will come to reign and to be honoured.

Matthew 24, The coming of the Son of Man will be like the lightning that shines from one end of the heaven to the other. So who is God? First of all, he's the creator.

But secondly, he is the saviour. This great poem about God is also the God who revealed himself in history in the Exodus. A few times later on, look back and read Exodus 15, the song that Moses sang when God led his people out of Egypt and across the Red Sea.

[6 : 18] It's very closely modelled on this. This is the God. This is the God who did this great event in history. Timan, that's why verse 3, God came from Timan and the Holy One from Mount Paran.

Timan and Paran are the hilly country around the Gulf of Sinai to which the route of the Exodus went. In other words, he's not just up there. He is down here.

He is the God in Genesis 1 who creates heaven and earth and in Genesis 2 comes right down into his creation. God came. The word can actually be translated God will come as well.

Particular tense of that verb. And it points, it doesn't just look back to the Exodus, it points forward to a greater event. In Luke, when Jesus stands on the Transfiguration Mountain with Moses and Elijah, Luke says they spoke of his departure, of his Exodus, that he would carry out at Jerusalem.

So as Habakkuk looks at God, as he looks into the past and into the future, he sees the time when a new Moses and a greater Moses will come. Jesus Christ will lead his people into the Promised Land.

[7 : 33] That's the first thing then. Who God is. Then the second thing Habakkuk says is what God does. Verses 8 to 15. Now in a sense you can't separate these.

Who God is, what God does, are inseparable. Nevertheless, the second part concentrates on his activities. once again, back to the Exodus and forward to the coming.

And God, first of all, is the one who conquers evil. Verse 8, was you, well first of all, verse 7, I saw the tents of cushion in affliction, the curtains of the land of Midian did tremble.

He destroys the human enemies. He did that in the past. He'll do it again. But he also destroys the supernatural enemies. Was your wrath against the rivers?

Was your anger against the rivers? Or your indignation against the sea? I think I said last week, the sea, the great sea, the rivers, are symbols of the power of evil.

[8 : 32] The place where Leviathan, the dragon, lives. And in the book of Daniel, four beasts rise out of the great sea. Here it is the source of the problems.

In other words, it's not Babylon that God is going to defeat. It's Satan himself. Way back in Genesis 3, verse 15, a great contest was announced. The Lord God puts himself on the side of humanity and says, one day there is going to be the descendant who will crush the serpent.

And one day, victory is going to be clear. And when you think of the sea in that way, it makes sense of a lot of passages in Scripture. I, John's vision at the end of Revelation, I saw the news of the heavenly city and there was no more sea.

That's one reason I didn't want to go to heaven when I was a boy, because I love the sea. I grew up by the sea. But that's not about the hydrological arrangements of the new Jerusalem.

That's saying there is no power of evil there any longer. Indeed, in an earlier chapter, Satan is cast into the lake of fire. And it also explains a passage in the Gospel of Mark when the awestruck question of the disciples, who then is this, that even the winds and the waves obey him?

[9 : 53] Only God can defeat the winds and the waves. So he defeats evil. But he also protects his people. You rode on your horses on your chariot of salvation.

Verse 8. Then verse 13. You went out for the salvation of your people. For the salvation of your anointed. You crushed. Notice the word crushed from Genesis.

You crushed the head of the house of the wicked. Now the anointed are God's people or the remnant of God's people from whom is to come one particular person, the anointed one, the Messiah.

So you see what's happening here. Habakkuk is looking at the same scene. The Babylonian army has not been destroyed. They're still rampaging around the earth. They're still going to destroy Jerusalem and burn the temple and take God's people away into captivity.

But notice verse 13. Then you crushed the head of the house of the wicked. There are going to be other Babylonians.

[10 : 59] There's going to be Greece. There's going to be Persia, Greece and Rome and many others after it. Nevertheless, the victory is certain because God is crushing the real enemy. So who God is?

What God does? And finally, verses 16 to 19. What are we to do? If God is like that, if he does that, what are we to do? And we have a portrait here of the one already mentioned in chapter 2, verse 4.

In chapter 2, verse 4, the Lord had said, the righteous shall live by his faith. Here is a portrait of the righteous, though the fig tree does not blossom. And I think there are two things here.

First of all, there is this sense of trembling and awe. 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 quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. This sense of awe that John had on the island of Pep as I saw the risen Lord and I fell at his feet as though dead.

[12 : 04] If we're not too proud to look for it, we'll find a similar example, an illustration, in *The Wind and the Willows*. Perhaps not a book that you read very often.

This is when Rat and Mole come upon Pan on the island. And Mole says, Rat, he found breath to whisper. Are you afraid? Afraid, murmured Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love.

Afraid of him? Oh, never, never. And yet, yet, Mole, I am afraid. See, there's no contradiction between love and fear.

And you will remember, I almost certainly have mentioned this before, probably each of the three weeks previously, that at the end of the last battle, when the animals and the creatures approach Aslan, they all approach him with fear, but some of them approach him with fear and love and are welcomed, others approach him with fear and hatred and disappear into the dark shadow of his left-hand side.

That's what Habakkuk is talking about here. I will quietly wait for the day of trouble. Come on, the people who invade us. So there is awe, this sense of awe. Come, let us bow down.

[13 : 16] Let us fall before the Lord, our Maker. But there is also joyful faith. Oh, the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, and so on. This is a faith that's not dependent on outward circumstances.

That's why it's so difficult. Because we are so bound in time and space that we need vision to go beyond it, but on God himself, and the answer is in God.

I haven't yet quoted from the *Screwtape Letters*, but I'm going to now. At the end of the *Screwtape Letters*, when the *Screwtape* writes to *Wormwood* in baffled rage about how at the moment of death their patient had entered life everlasting, this is what he says.

One moment, it seemed to be all our world. The scream of bombs, the fall of houses, the stink and taste of high explosive on the lips and in the lungs, the feet burning with weariness, the heart cold with horrors, the legs aching, the brain reeling.

Next moment, all this was gone, gone like a bad dream. Defeated, outmaneuvered, fooled. Did you mark how naturally the earth-born vermin entered the new life?

[14 : 32] The world of Habakkuk, the scream of bombs, the fall of houses. And then this, he saw him, this animal, this thing begotten in a bed, could look on him.

What is blinding, suffocating fire to you is now cool light to him, is clarity itself and wears the form of a man.

Taking up the imagery of light, of course, which is here in Habakkuk. But surely, the ultimate answer here is the fact that he saw him.

Not that he saw the circumstances change. He could wait patiently for that because he saw him. It's a great Christmas, him says, and our eyes last shall see him through his own redeeming love.

That really is what the book of Habakkuk is saying to us. As we finish, let me just say two things. First of all, the book of Habakkuk tells us it is right to ask questions.

[15 : 30] Habakkuk raises big, difficult questions. How long? Why do the wicked prosper? Why is the world the way it is? And God is willing to listen to and engage with these questions.

Nowhere does God say, Habakkuk, you shouldn't be asking these questions. He engages with them seriously. And if we want to be serious with God, we need to ask big questions.

The questions about God's goodness, God's providence and so on. But secondly, we need to get beyond questions to worship and that's what Habakkuk is doing in chapter 3.

It's interesting, isn't it? The answer comes in a poem. Well, the whole of Habakkuk is a poem. This is a particularly glorious one. In this heightened and beautiful language with all its echoes of earlier scriptures, particularly of Exodus 15, God brings Habakkuk to a point where he's saying, Lord, I want to see you.

That is what it's about. Even if I don't yet know the answer to the questions, that's why he says, I will wait quietly for the day of trouble to come upon the people who invade us, realizing that in this life not all the answers will come, but realizing too that in this life God makes my feet like the deers.

[16:47] He makes me tread on my high places. Isaiah had said, hadn't he, those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run and not be weary.

They will walk and not faint. That's my final point. I know I said two points ago as my final point. John Stott said she'd only say finally once, but this is really my final point.

Habakkuk is saying not that this God is so great that he cannot fail. It's not that he's too great to care. It's that he's too great to fail.

And in that confidence let's go back into the world, let's go into our lives and wait patiently for the day that is revealed here. Let's pray. And our eyes at last shall see him through his own redeeming love.

Father, keep that vision burning brightly before us as we ask the questions, as we face the problems and help us to wait patiently until the day when the earth is indeed filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

[18:00] And so take us back to our work, to our leisure, to whatever we are doing this afternoon surrounded by your goodness and protected by your love. In Jesus' name.

Amen.