

## Habakkuk 3 Sermon

### Intro

How do we talk to God in a time of suffering? If we're human, we suffer. This world is broken, we all experience suffering in this world, so how do we talk to God from this position?

That's where Habakkuk is in chapter 3. He's cried out to God with his problems, and God has given a surprising response, then he's cried out to God again, asking him to judge the wicked Babylonians, and God has said He will judge them, but not yet, and so Habakkuk is to live patiently, by faith. So what now? Habakkuk is sitting in Jerusalem, knowing that he's going to be taken into exile and that it's God's plan for that to happen. How does he talk to God in his suffering when he knows that his suffering isn't going to change?

Imagine a young girl, about to turn 16, whose Mum has cancer, and it's not getting better. The doctors have decided to stop the chemotherapy, because it isn't working. Actually, you don't have to imagine, here's a picture. And less than a month after this picture was taken this girl woke up in the morning and her Mum didn't. How do you tell this girl to pray? What should she say to God?

I find this question really personally relevant, because that's my sister, and that's my Mum. And when Mum died, I couldn't talk to God. I just didn't know what to say.

We've called this series "From Perplexity to Peace", and that's because chapter three shows us how Habakkuk finds peace in his circumstances. I think maybe we could call it "From perplexity to praise", because this chapter is actually a Psalm, a song of praise to God, written down so that future generations could sing it too. But if we look at the start and the end of the chapter, we see little musical instructions. This was meant to be sung!

You might be feeling some suffering like Habakkuk now. Maybe struggles in a relationship, or a family member being seriously ill, or the stresses of isolation under Covid restrictions. Well, let's sing along with Habakkuk, let's let the words from his heart bring peace to ours.

Habakkuk gives us three ways we can talk to a God whom we trust in our suffering. And the first one is this – remembering. Habakkuk remembers

### **1. Remember v3-15**

These verses are so poetic, but the imagery that Habakkuk uses is drawing on the Exodus, God's rescue of His people from Egypt. He starts by talking about God coming down from heaven – "God came from Teman, the Holy One from Mount Paran". These aren't just random place names, they're locations in the wilderness associated with God's appearance to his people at Mount Sinai. Habakkuk remembers how God came and appeared to Moses on the mountain and guided the Israelites through the wilderness, but He didn't just appear with a pop, no he came in glory. Look at verses 4-7. He appeared like the rising sun, blazing into every corner, Plague and pestilence, great forces that wreck societies -and actually even with all our modern medicine, the plague of Covid-19 has brought our world to its knees – these things are shown to be under God's control as he brought plagues on Egypt. God stays still, standing, and looking, but the whole earth, every nation shakes and trembles. Though the mountains, the most constant things, tall and mighty, though they crumble and collapse, God marches on. He is stronger even than the mountains. And the mighty nations of Cushan and Midian are in distress and anguish, they're terrified! And who wouldn't be! This God,

this glorious, mighty God is coming! Habakkuk is looking back to God's appearance to His people and viewing this as a pattern, which shows him who God is.

From verse 8 the imagery moves slightly and we see God as a mighty warrior. Maybe you've never thought of God in this way, it's not common in our culture. But God is a mighty warrior, fearsome and strong. Habakkuk addresses Him directly in verse 8 "Were you angry with the rivers, Lord? Was your wrath against the streams? Did you rage against the sea when you rode your horses and your chariots to victory?" Habakkuk remembers God's display of strength, holding back the waters of the Red Sea so his people could cross on dry land – He rode out to victory. God the warrior has horses, chariots, arrows, a flashing spear. You do not want to be on the wrong side of this God's anger. Even the mountains writhe at the sight of Him.

And look down at verse 12, He is angry! He's angry at evil and injustice, and this is good. Habakkuk now remembers how God judged the nations that disobeyed Him in the past. God does care about injustice, He always has done, and He's furious. But His march through the earth is not judgment alone, let me read verses 12 and 13 – "In wrath you strode through the earth, in anger you threshed the nations. You came out to deliver your people, to save your anointed one.." God's anger and powerful judgment are for the deliverance, for the rescue of His people. This is what Habakkuk remembers. He remembers that this mighty God cares enough to unleash His entire arsenal of weaponry to judge the nations and rescue His people.

Singing along with Habakkuk means taking our eyes off our current situation and looking back to what God has done, seeing His power, His wrath, and His mercy in rescuing His people. And of course, Habakkuk could only look back to the rescue of Israel, but we can look back to God's ultimate rescue of all His people from the power of sin and death at the cross. As Jesus died, Matthew's gospel tells us that the earth shook. The fierce anger of the mighty warrior God fell on His beloved, sinless Son, and it was for the salvation of His people. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

What's the suffering that you're going through? Has Covid taken away so many things you love? Maybe you've missed precious time with family that you're never going to get back. Maybe you've lost your job and finances are tight. Or maybe life's just monotonous, and you're low all the time, and it feels like there's nothing that can bring you joy. Or it could be suffering unrelated to the pandemic – feeling lonely, maybe being single and longing to be married, maybe being married and longing for that marriage to be easier. Or a feeling of despair at the evil in this world, a friend or relative getting ill, or, like I experienced four years ago, a loved one dying. How do you pray? Well sing and pray along with Habakkuk – lift your eyes away from your situation and look back to the cross – see God's wrath and mercy there, remember God saved you, and that He loves you more than you could ever know.

And if you're not a Christian, can you see that Habakkuk's situation tells us that God doesn't make life easy, but what He does do is give us perspective. Read the gospel, the life story of Jesus and see how God rescued His people, and how that is so much bigger than any of our sufferings in this life.

Number one remember.

## **2. Wait v2, v16**

I slightly skipped over the beginning of the chapter, but there's a little theme that comes at the beginning and end of this section of remembering, let me read verse 2 and verse 16. "Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make

them known. In wrath remember mercy” and verse 16 “I heard and my heart pounded, my lips quivered at the sound; decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us.”

Habakkuk’s remembrance is not just reminiscing, it’s remembrance that leads to confidence. It’s future-focussed remembrance. Now, this may sound a bit odd, surely remembering is always linked to the past, but we do future-focussed remembering all the time. Let me illustrate this, at the next football world cup, I reckon people will say “Well remember how we did in 2018, we got to the semi-finals!” and that won’t be just a happy memory, it’ll be a memory that suggests maybe we can do that again, or even better! And that’s what Habakkuk does here “I stand in awe of your deeds Lord, repeat them!” God, do it again! Rescue your people one more time like you did before! “I will wait patiently” – He’s confident, he knows it’s going to happen, because God has said it will, and he knows from the past that God is more than able to rescue. He views the Exodus, the rescue from Egypt as a pattern, and looks through that lens to God’s future defeat of the Babylonians, and actually, even further, to God’s ultimate defeat of all evil and wickedness.

Though God rescued His people from exile in Babylon, they never really got the safe life of blessing in the promised land that they wanted. Even after the return from exile, there was still evil inside and outside of God’s people. And there still is today. So Habakkuk looked forward to the defeat of the Babylonians yes, but I think he was looking even further forward, to the day when God will come from heaven one last time and put an end to evil, to rescue His people once and for all. Habakkuk waits for the day of calamity to come not on Israel, but on the invading nation. This is what God called Habakkuk to in chapter 2v4 “The righteous person will live by his faithfulness.” Live knowing God will act, have faith in Him because He is faithful – live patiently, by faith.

We look back to the cross and we see God’s wrath and mercy, but, like Habakkuk, we can use that remembering to look forward with confidence to the day when God will come and shake the earth once more. We wait patiently for that. His wrath will come on all who reject Him, and for us who know Jesus, we will experience the full riches of His mercy. Romans 5 says “If, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” Basically, look back to the cross, if God’s done that, we can have safe and secure confidence in Him rescuing us from His wrath when Jesus comes again and bringing us into eternity with Him.

### **3. Rejoice (v17-19)**

And it’s as Habakkuk looks back at the past and has confidence in the future that he is able to rejoice. Now, this passage might be a little inaccessible to us at first. Have you ever seen a fig tree? Figs just make me think of fig roll biscuits, which were always left to the bottom of the biscuit tin in favour of chocolate digestives and custard creams, so I don’t think it would be a huge issue in my life if a fig-tree didn’t bud. And when I read “The olive crop fails” I don’t think “Oh no!” I think, well, my pizza might be a bit less interesting without olives, but not a really big deal.

See it seems like Habakkuk is lamenting the loss of luxuries, but then we see “No food, no sheep, no cattle.” This is a complete and utter disaster for an agricultural society. As the Babylonians invaded they rolled through the fields and the fruits of the land were no more. This is dreadful. But the surprise comes in verse 18 “Yet I will rejoice in the Lord”. Joy even in suffering. And it’s not joy based on the knowledge that the things he’s lost will come back. Habakkuk doesn’t say “Though the fields produce no food, I will rejoice, because soon there will be food.”

No, that material encouragement can only go so far. It's not always true that things will get better, there's not always a clear reason for our suffering. If Habakkuk rejoiced in material things, if he rejoiced because he knew it would get better, then how do I sing along with him when my Mum's just died? "Oh you'll see her again one day", but I want to see her now. I've still lost the potential of 30 or so years with my Mum. And what about the person who's mourning the loss of someone who wasn't a Christian? What about those of us who have lost things due to Covid-19 or other suffering that we're never going to get back? Missed experiences, missed celebrations, illness? Can we honestly turn to God and say "I rejoice because it's going to get better"? I don't think we can, at least, not if we're looking at this life and this world.

But we can sing along with Habakkuk as he says "I will rejoice *in the Lord*. I will be joyful *in God my saviour*." It's God that makes Habakkuk rejoice. It's a knowledge of his relationship with the saving God that allows him to look past his circumstances and rejoice. We said at the start of our service "What shall separate us from the love of God" – Nothing! Nothing in all creation! We rejoice in *the Lord Himself*. God saving us is a means to an end, and that end is a relationship. Sing along with Habakkuk, rejoice that God has saved us to a wonderful relationship with Him. And this last verse is a beautiful picture. "The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to tread on the heights."

Have you ever seen a deer climbing a mountain? They make it look easy! I don't know how they do it, but their little legs seem to find exactly the right places to go and they just stand on the side of the mountain, no problem. And this is what God can do for us. As we remember His rescue in the past, and as we wait in faith for His final rescue, we can be steadfast in the sufferings of this life. We can tread on the heights, whatever the world throws at us.

Maybe you need this right now. Maybe life is impossibly hard and you don't know how to talk to God. Or maybe, life's actually ok at the moment. If you're in the latter group, can I suggest you store up this chapter and this book for a day when life's going less well? Because that day will come. And when it does, praying will be hard. But sing along with Habakkuk – remember, wait and rejoice.

I've written a little prayer here thinking back to the biggest time of suffering in my life, trying to take the heart of Habakkuk's prayer and sing it along with Him.

"Lord, I know you have saved me through Jesus. I know you have defeated my sin at the cross and shown me mercy. I know your power, and I wait patiently and confidently for you to defeat evil, suffering and death when Jesus returns. And even though *my Mum has just died*, I will rejoice in God my Saviour. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to tread on the heights."

I'm going to give us a minute or so now. Have a think about what you could put in that gap, what's your fig tree that doesn't bud? Either something you're going through now, or something that has happened in the past, or something that might happen. Unhappy relationship status, whether that's in a relationship or not in one. Being separated from relatives and friends. Someone close to you dying, or already having died. There could be so many others. Have a think to yourself, no need to share it with anyone, and in a minute, I'll pray that prayer, leaving a gap for us all to insert our situations in the gap. And then I'll hand back to Charlie.

"Lord, I know you have saved me through Jesus. I know you have defeated my sin at the cross and shown me mercy. I know your power, and I wait patiently and confidently for you to defeat evil, suffering and death when Jesus returns. And even though \_\_\_\_\_, I will rejoice in God

my Saviour. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer; he enables me to tread on the heights.”

Amen