

How Long, Oh LORD?: Statement of Faith

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 October 2017

Preacher: Rev. Daniel Beilman

[0 : 00] Today, we come to our final Sunday in our four-week study of the book of Habakkuk. It ends with a beautiful expression of faith and piety.

Now, let me remind you of where we've been so far. The book of Habakkuk was composed probably during the reign of King Jehoiakim, who reigned in Judah, 609 to 598 BC. Habakkuk complains to God in the beginning of the book how evil was so rampant in Judah and that God was silent about it.

So God responds. He says he's going to use the Babylonian nation to execute justice on God's behalf, punishing wicked Judah.

Habakkuk says, whoa. That's a paraphrase. He says, whoa. Wait a minute. Babylon is even worse than Judah.

[1 : 03] They're proud. They're violent. You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, you're going to use them to bring about your justice? That makes no sense.

God says, yes. Yes, I will. But be assured, the Babylonians won't escape my judgment either. So we arrive in chapter 3.

Here Habakkuk ponders a theophany. A theophany is an appearance of a God. God is revealed in all his might and power and glory.

And Habakkuk is left trembling and utters this amazing statement of faith and devotion, which I'll again read in full. As I read, put yourself in Habakkuk's shoes and keep in mind life in the ancient world and the degree of devastation and desolation that Habakkuk is invoking.

Though the thick tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls yet, I will rejoice in the Lord.

[2 : 23] I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God the Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the deer's. He makes me tread on my high places.

We're left with the thought, man, isn't Habakkuk a really good guy? A great man of faith. That he would envision utter destruction, exile, and slavery.

The decimation of his people, his nation, and culture by an evil invading power and still be committed to his God. However, this isn't the last line of the book.

It didn't appear as we went through it together. The last line is easy to overlook, but it alters our understanding of those verses. The last line says, It's a musical notation.

We've heard a couple of other notations in this chapter. Verse 1 says, A prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet, according to Shigyanoth.

[3 : 31] We don't know exactly what Shigyanoth means, but it's probably a musical term. And then three other times, in this third chapter of Habakkuk, you'll find the word Selah.

You can also find that word in the Psalms. It's also a musical notation. We don't know exactly what it means, but it probably means pause, like at the end of a musical refrain. All of this means that this prayer isn't just Habakkuk's prayer.

This prayer is meant to be sung by God's people. This prayer is meant to be your prayer. So we're not meant to say, Oh, isn't Habakkuk a great, faithful, pious man?

We're supposed to say, That's me in the text. I'm supposed to say that. I'm supposed to declare a profound faith in God, despite the worst possible things that could happen to me.

What would those things be? It might be, If I were to lose my job, I would still rejoice in God.

[4 : 45] Though my friends turn their backs on me, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. Though injustice would flourish in this country, though my loved ones should suffer as a result of that injustice.

Though the present world order should completely and utterly collapse and lead to unimaginable suffering and despair, I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

If I were to say this personally, the worst thing that could happen to me, I think, would be for me to lose a son. I have four sons. And if I were to say, were I to lose a son, yet I will still rejoice in the Lord.

Well, I wouldn't want to say that. I don't want to say that. But this book calls me to say it. No matter what, I will follow God.

Okay, we're still only in this introduction of the sermon. But I would like to wait about 30 more seconds before we go on for you to think of what would be like the worst possible thing to happen to you.

[6 : 00] Maybe write it down with a pen or on your phone or just close your eyes and think, what could you fill in the blank there? If this were to happen to me, yet I will still rejoice in the Lord.

The question this book poses is how do we get to the point where Habakkuk was?

Where we can really say that and mean it. What could root us and ground us in God so that we can have this kind of faith? I believe Habakkuk gives us two answers.

We need to look at the whole book, I think, for this. It gives us two answers. A conversation with God and a glorious vision of God can root us and ground us.

A conversation and a glorious vision. Let's pray. Father, I realize that many of us didn't have to think very long for many of us are actually going through things right now that seem like the very worst of all possible things that could happen to us.

[7 : 31] We've thought about our marriage collapsing, our child being very ill.

We've thought about our parents having suffered through cancer and passing away. For many of us, we're in a really good stage experiencing lots of shalom.

But for all of us, we need to hear what you have to say to us so that we could be filled with a joyful, confident, steadfast faith.

We would acknowledge that to be a gift from you. And we ask for that gift, please, as your children. In Jesus' name, amen. Okay, by the time we get to chapter 3, verse 17, Habakkuk has already had a substantial dialogue with God.

And what we should find to be instructive about that dialogue is that it even takes place. In other words, we can learn from Habakkuk's methodology.

[8 : 43] For Habakkuk to reach the point where he can rest in God, for him to find strength and joy in God, he first needs to know God intimately.

And this means being completely himself in the presence of God. In other words, when you start the book, you don't get the sense that Habakkuk has followed a particular formula when he addresses God.

He hasn't composed and edited a prayer ahead of time with which to address God. Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for this day. You're so great.

There's some bad things happening in Judah. And I'd now like to bring those before your presence and your holy throne. He doesn't do that, okay? It's as if we're like dropped into the middle of this long ongoing rant.

Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help? Why are you idle? If we want the faith of Habakkuk, we need to first adopt his posture.

[9 : 44] He's always in prayer. And he feels the freedom to address God at any time about anything. It's difficult though, especially when we have doubts or anger or confusion.

If you're anything like me, those feelings of doubts, fear, confusion, anger, are often linked with shame. Oh, I'm not supposed to feel those things.

So let me clean all that stuff up before I address God in prayer tomorrow for my daily devotional. Listen, prayer is not the place for processed feelings.

Let me take my anger and frustration, pasteurize them at some sticky, sweet, high fructose corn syrup, some red food coloring number five, some slick packaging and present them to God.

Prayer isn't the place for processed feelings. Prayer is the place where you process your feelings. And you get that from Habakkuk.

[10 : 56] You get Habakkuk raw and uncensored. And you don't get processed feelings in many other places of scripture either, especially the Psalms, especially the Psalms of lament.

Psalm 44 is a favorite of mine in this regard. The psalmist writes, you have made us like sheep for slaughter. Wake up.

Why are you sleeping? Rouse yourself. Doesn't feel appropriate. Those are things I address my children with in the morning. If you are God's child, then you have been united to Christ, which means you have been brought fully human with all of your humanishness into the life of the Trinity. He welcomes, he expects your confusion, your doubts, your fears, your anger. I was talking to a friend last week and he was looking for some advice.

He faces a lot of injustice in his vocation and he was looking for things to read to make sense of it all. He was looking for, he was looking for a method, which in the West, we're very big on.

[12:11] Just give me these steps so I can solve this problem. And I asked him very simply, I mean, have you asked God what he thinks of this? Have you asked God why he lets these things happen?

And immediately, an emotional struggle like surfaced right into his face. That emotional struggle is what God wants from us.

That moment when we're most ourselves. What would happen if we prayed this way consistently? What if these weren't just our private prayers, but the way we prayed publicly?

What if this is the way this church was known for praying? Boston University professor Claire Wolf-Type points us to the South African church in her delightful book called *Lord Have Mercy*, praying for justice with conviction and humility.

In one chapter, she meditates on the Psalms of Lament, like Psalm 44, which I quoted earlier. And she points us to funerals in apartheid era South Africa as examples of a people praying through injustice.

[13:28] She notes one such funeral for four men in June of 1985. These men had left the small town of Craddock to go to a political meeting and they never made it back.

They'd been kidnapped, taken to a deserted area, and murdered. Their burned, mutilated bodies were unceremoniously left alongside a road.

And though the government denied it at the time, though they denied responsibility for their deaths, it was later proved that seven police officers, reportedly acting on orders from the apartheid regime, had committed these crimes.

They became known as the Craddock Four. The funeral was attended by tens of thousands of South Africans in a soccer stadium in Craddock. And one American observer described the clothes of the funeral.

The pallbearers lifted the four coffins to their shoulders and a procession of clergy led the way from the dusty stadium down to the village cemetery. On either side of the solemn procession, people stood eight and ten deep and every one of them, every single person, had their fists raised.

[14:36] no one moved. The only sound in the crowd was the quiet singing of the black national anthem. That song calls on God to bless the people of Africa and hear their prayers.

Standing at the funeral, watching the coffins of the men from Craddock pass by, the people raised their fists and sang in the African Shosa language, Lord, bless Africa.

May her spirit rise high up. Hear thou our prayers. Lord, bless us. Descend, O Spirit. Descend, Holy Spirit.

Lord, bless us. Your family. The words ran out amid the rows of mourners standing with their clenched fists raised in the air.

Under a part high, funerals became not only healing rituals of prayer, and consolation, but also public spaces for expression of outrage, indignation.

[15:44] One contemporary observer recalls, funerals were the places where community anger could be most blistering, and it was often the public prayers of church persons, some leaders, some local pastors, that held the line, affirming that anger, embracing the pain, holding it up to God and reminding everyone that God is not mocked.

You can hear the spirit of Habakkuk in these apartheid-era funerals. And Claire Wolf-Type sees a continuity. This is why I asked, what would it be like if we prayed like this publicly?

She sees a continuity between these funerals, which framed protests in prayer, with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. That was the process by which crimes and atrocities were confessed and truth came out and amnesty at times granted.

Desmond Tutu, Anglican priest and then eventually the archbishop, presided over both. He presided over many funerals, including that of the Craddock Four, and he was chosen to lead the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

And though he was at times sharply rebuked, he would also frame the Truth and Reconciliation proceedings in prayer. As Jesus taught us to pray, the posture of prayer opens us up to the possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation.

[17:11] So when you're wondering, what should you do? Or how should you react when we see injustice around us? When yet another gunman unleashes death on a crowd of people?

When yet again white supremacists gather in Charlottesville in another display of hate? When you wonder how it is that the killer of Philander Castile walks free?

When our government seems broken beyond repair? Cry out privately and publicly, how long, oh Lord?

How long? rouse yourself. Do these things with your core group or come to church early when we announce these things.

When there's a special time of prayer, make prayer the space in which you express your doubt and your anger and your frustration. Now if you're left wondering, one last note about this, if you're left wondering how it is, how it could be respectful or honoring to God to address him this way.

[18:25] Consider how prayers of lament and complaint honor God. First, they acknowledge God is able to fix things. They acknowledge his power and rule and conversely, they're a renouncement of our idols, our idols of politics or wealth, those things we put too much stock in to fix the things, the problems of the world.

These prayers acknowledge God's character as being good and just. I think of C.S. Lewis' quote. It was this thing of injustice that eventually was one of the things that brought him to faith in Christ. He wrote, my argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust, but how had I got this idea of just and unjust?

A man does not call a lion crooked, unless he has some idea of a straight line. So you see in our complaints, we're acknowledging God's character. These prayers tell the story of creation, that things now aren't the way they were meant to be, as created a good.

These prayers deepen our union with Christ. Jesus himself prayed this way. We get that sense when it says Jesus wept, right?

[19:49] The death of his friend Lazarus. That word wept is more like snorting. It's an indignation. Angry. This is not the way things were meant to be.

And they join us to God's mission to renew the world. All right. So we see that before Habakkuk expresses his faith in the God of Israel, he has a conversation with him, which means deep intimacy with him.

And second, this leads him to a glorious vision of God. In this vision, Habakkuk beholds God's character and his deeds. He sees God's glory described in verse 4, a splendor covering the heavens and as a blinding brightness described in verse 8.

His power is described in relationship to creation. The rivers and the sea served him as agents of his wrath. We see God's holiness on display and his jealousy demanding that all worship belongs to him.

In verse 6, we read that the eternal mountains were scattered. These are those ancient hills which were the domain of the baals and the ashters.

[21:06] Those were the Canaanite gods and goddesses who were widely worshipped for the prosperity and fertility they were reputed to bring. They were household gods that had shrines on hilltops near every village and on these hills God pours out his judgment.

The everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting wings. God's wrath was married to his love. It was on behalf of his people that he displayed his fury.

you went out for the salvation of your people for the salvation of your anointed. Habakkuk is witnessing God's glory and he's recounting God's deeds on behalf of his people.

He's recalling the history of salvation as revealed in scripture, particularly the exodus of Israel out of bondage and slavery in Egypt. Verse 2, Habakkuk writes, O Lord, I have heard the report of you and your work, O Lord, do I fear.

In verse 5, we read that before him went pestilence and plague followed at his heels, recalling the plagues with which he afflicted Egypt just before Israel escapes Egypt.

[22 : 12] In verse 3, Habakkuk witnesses God coming from Timon and Mount Paran. Now, I didn't know what those things were before I read this. I looked them up. Timon is in southern Palestine, and the Paran mountains lie further south on the eastern edge of the Sinai Peninsula.

God's formation of his people began in this region. It's the place in which Israel found refuge from Egypt after deliverance from the Egyptian army at the sea. It is the place of Mount Sinai where God's covenant with Israel was confirmed, where the community of Israel was established under God's instructions.

It is the place where God began to act in mighty ways to lead, protect, judge, and shape his people. Just as God has acted before on behalf of his people, Habakkuk expects God to do it again.

In verse two, he writes, in the midst of the years, revive your work. In the midst of the years, make it known. In wrath, remember mercy. This vision of God's glory and his character and the story of redemption that he's telling through history also looks forward.

The hope of the righteous is strengthened by the confidence that God is bringing the world's affairs to a decisive conclusion, a conclusion in which God's just rule will be unconditionally established.

[23 : 35] We know this conclusion to be God's final and decisive act on behalf of his people. What we're saying is Habakkuk is looking forward to Jesus.

Jesus' death and resurrection gives God the final victory over all his enemies. Death, sin, and all the powers that oppose his rule. Colossians 2 tells us that on the cross, Christ disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them on the cross.

In the 5th century, Theodorate of Cyrus observed how Habakkuk 3 points forward to Jesus' triumph on the cross. Theodorate wrote, In all of what Habakkuk said, he conveyed to us the ineffable power of God.

Action follows his will, and by merely wishing it, he moves the earth, undoes human nature, splits open the mountains and melts the hills like wax.

In fact, he has not ceased doing such things for people's benefit. Now, in what is said, he implies also the cross.

[24 : 49] which is the source of salvation for all people. On the cross, Christ the Lord took his position, shook the earth, moved and split open the mountains, struck with fear the order of demons, and destroyed their shrines on mountains and hills.

Habakkuk had a glorious vision of God, which fed and empowered his faith. We have a more glorious and complete vision of God.

we have Jesus himself. So, brothers and sisters, we can have a faith like Habakkuk when we realize that God has subjected himself to the kind of loss Habakkuk describes, yet on an infinite scale.

He's pledged to us his loyalty to us at the cost of his own son. son. It was he that lost his son. For us was his own son pierced.

For us was his son crushed, laid bare from thigh to neck. Through the death of God's son at the hands of unjust men, we are brought into relationship with the father.

[26 : 03] And in that relationship, we are now free to groan to him in our suffering, to cry out in our indignation, and to wait confidently for the day when God in perfect justice will unite all things to him, things in heaven and earth.

Can we honestly make a statement? A statement of faith like Habakkuk's. Maybe.

Maybe. But it begins with trusting in God's statement of faithfulness to us. Right?

God's statement of faithfulness to us. We see that in Jesus. And when we see that, we can begin to confidently answer the following question like the Heidelberg Catechism does.

You could have asked Habakkuk at the end of chapter 3, what is your only comfort in life and in death? And then he would have recited verses 17 through 19. But now with the cross, this is how we can answer.

[27 : 23] What is my only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own. But I belong body and soul and life and death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He is fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven.

In fact, all things must work together for my salvation because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit. He assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to

live for him.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.