

A difficult answer

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[0:00] Let's just... Habakkuk chapter 1.

As I think I said last time, the contents page is your friend in finding Habakkuk.! But hopefully as we look at it more and more we'll just be able to find it as we work our way through the minor prophets. If someone has a church Bible, do shout out a page number actually. Page 940. 940. There we go. The prophecy that Habakkuk the prophet received.

How long, Lord, must I call for help? But you do not listen. Or cry out violence. But you do not say. Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? Destruction and violence are before me.

[1:09] There is strife. And conflict abounds. Therefore the law is paralyzed. And justice never prevails.

The wicked hemming the righteous. So that justice is perverted. Look at the nations and watch. And be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians.

That ruthless and impetuous people who sweep across the whole earth. To seize dwellings not their own. They are a feared and dreaded people.

They are a lord to themselves. And promote their own honor. Their horses are swifter than leopards. Fiercer than wolves at dusk.

[2:20] Their cavalry gallops headlong. Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle's eagle swooping to devour.

They all come intent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind. And gather prisoners like the sands.

They mock kings. And scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities. By building earthen ramps. They capture them. Then they sweep past like the wind. And go on. Guilty people. Whose strength is their God's.

This is God's words. And we're going to look at it in a moment. But we'll sing another song. A marvelous song. I'm sure Habakkuk wondered.

[3:28] What are you doing, Lord? God moves in a mysterious way. His wonders to perform. We'll stand and sing.

And then we'll have a look at Habakkuk. We'll sing a prayer. And ask for God's help as we look at his word together. Our Father God, thank you that you speak to us.

And Lord, we pray particularly for your help today. As we look at a passage and maybe we scratch our heads and wonder, what are you doing? Lord, help us.

And speak to us. And encourage us. Challenge us. Do us good, we pray. Amen.

I want to get you guys discussing as well during this. So, a question to chat with the people around you.

[4:29] Is there ever such a thing as unanswered prayer? Chat with people around you. People are saying.

Anybody have an answer to my question? Told you I was going to get you thinking. Isabel, thank you.

Oh, I think, hang on. The mic's not on. No, I think it's just... Hello? It's just us, Emma. Yeah, that's all right.

No, basically, I believe there's unanswered prayer. It's rare, but when we pray for something that is not good for us, God is not going to answer that prayer. We don't understand why, but then it might come up later, and we might find later why it wasn't answered, and find out it was for our good.

But is that answered? It's answered in a way you can't see. So, yeah, for us as humans, it would be an unanswered prayer.

[5:55] From our end, from our side. From our point of view. Yeah, from our vantage point, yeah. Any other thoughts? Phil? Excellent. There are places where God says he will not hear prayer.

So, in the first chapter of Isaiah, he says, you spread out your hands to me in prayer, but your hands are full of blood. Yeah. So, there are situations and people, and actually issues for which he will not hear prayer.

But I think for believing people, in the normal sense of it, that's a little bit different. I mean, he does promise to hear our prayers.

Yeah. Excellent. Any, what may be a final thought, if anyone has them? It's okay if you don't. That's fine. Hold the microphone.

We'll use it. Oh, put it on the seat in front of you. There will be more discussion in a moment. Yeah.

[6:55] I think the answer has been good. Mark helpfully said, God answers yes, or wait, or no, or actually, I think as we're going to see with Habakkuk, yes, but in this way.

Probably not in the way Habakkuk was expecting. Just by way of introduction, really. A few years ago, I had a pack of these that I was eating my way through.

Whisper bites. Lovely light and chocolatey deliciousness. When suddenly I took one, and it had a hole in it.

It was hollow. Well, this is not a whisper. Whisper is what makes it, the inside is what makes it a whisper, that light, bubbly stuff.

It's not right. So I had to complain. I had to complain to cabberries, and so I did. I tweeted. I'm not impressed with this hollow whisper bite that I found today.

[8:09] Angry face emoji. Maybe not the wisest thing to tweet. But I got a reply from cabberries, and they said, yes, we hear you.

Fill in this form. So I filled in the form, and I complained some more, and a week later, some posts arrived, and what was in the post?

A one pound voucher. I wanted a lot more than that. I was expecting sort of a lifetime supply of chocolates. It didn't, it wasn't the answer I was waiting for.

A silly example, but maybe that's how we sometimes feel when we pray. We expect God to do something, maybe instantly, or something huge and amazing, sort out all our problems, or deal with the big worldwide issues, and yet we feel often God's not hearing those prayers, or God's not doing what we want him to do.

Maybe that's sometimes how we feel. I'd love us to chat for the next three or so minutes, again, with the people we're chatting to.

[9:36] Read verse five, and according to the Lord, how should Habakkuk feel about his answer to prayer? Because verse five is where the Lord's answer begins. And then read verse six, and how do you think that Habakkuk is actually feeling about this?

Have a chat for the next few minutes. Let's go. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

According to the Lord, how should Habakkuk feel about his answer? What was your answer there? Utterly amazed.

[12:06] Utterly amazed. Yeah, absolutely. When you hear that, when you're told you should look and be utterly amazed, wonder what you expect.

So it's something amazing, like some complete reversal of this violence and strife and people coming back to the Lord, worshipping him again, peace in the streets, justice being done.

That's probably the sort of thing you're expecting. But what was your answer to the second question? How do you think Habakkuk is actually feeling about this?

Maybe get the microphone around. Anyone want to give it a go? Thanks.

I would say that he is utterly flabbergasted. Yes. Yeah. Absolutely. And any other? Fearful. Fearful.

[13:16] Yeah. Petrified. Petrified. Yeah. I mean, for the sake of the recording. Petrified and fearful. Petrified and fearful.

Absolutely. Steve's got his hand up. Of course, in verse two, he'd ask, how long would you make me look on violence? And of course, in verse nine, he says, you ain't seen nothing yet.

They all become intent on violence. Yes. It's quite ironic, isn't it? Yeah. Yeah. We're sort of left scratching our heads, aren't we, here?

We'll pop the mic in front of you. Left scratching our heads here, thinking, why, Lord? How long can this go for?

What are you doing? I wanted you to do something, Habakkuk's probably thinking, but not that. And verse six, really, I think, is enough detail.

[14:17] Well, I'm raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people who sweep across the whole earth to see dwellings not their own. That's probably enough detail for Habakkuk.

You're raising up the Babylonians or Chaldeans, a big rising superpower in the world at Habakkuk's time. They're going to come in.

They're going to sweep God's people away into exile. Verse six would have been more than enough, but God gives plenty more details to Habakkuk.

And there's some pictures that we get to see here in a moment. So verse seven, there are feared and dreaded people. There are law to themselves. They promote their own honor.

Their horses are swifter than leopards. That's the first picture we have. I don't know 100% if that's a leopard, but Google says it is. Horses swifter than leopards.

[15:16] Probably not literally, but he's painting a picture of how big and mighty and terrifying they are.

Their horses are super fast, more than ready and quick and able to capture their enemies. And it goes on, their wolves are fiercer than, sorry, fiercer than wolves at dusk.

So I think we need to have the image of a wolf who's been waiting all day for its food and is just ready to pounce on its prey. That's how we're to see this Babylonian army.

Ready to pounce. And then another image there is they fly like an eagle swooping to devour. And that's interesting.

Can we turn back to Deuteronomy 28? And there is a microphone around. Would somebody be up for reading?

[16:23] Deuteronomy 28, 49 to 52. Maria, we're already at the microphones in front of you when you're ready.

Deuteronomy 28, 49 to 52. The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth, like an eagle swooping down.

A nation whose language you will not understand. A fierce-looking nation without respect for the old or pity for the young. They will devour the young of your livestock and the crops of your land until you are destroyed.

They will leave you no grain, new wine or oil, nor any calves of your herds or lambs, of your flocks, until you are ruined.

They will lay siege to all your land until the high fortified walls in which you trust fall down.

[17:44] They will besiege all the cities throughout the land the Lord your God is giving you. Thank you. So we've got there in Deuteronomy 28, long before Habakkuk was around, that image of enemies like an eagle swooping to devour.

Written in the context of curses for the Lord's people if they do not obey him. And now we see that happening.

They certainly, God's people certainly have turned away from him. Remember last time the law is paralyzed, God's word was not being followed. And so God is raising up these people like this eagle swooping to devour.

And we go on. And Steve has already pointed this out to us very helpfully.

Thank you, Steve. And verse 9. They all come intent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind and gather prisoners like the sand.

[18:58] Habakkuk's complaint was about violence. And God's answering his prayer by sending in even more violent people. What are you doing, God?

Maybe we think we should, we know how God should answer here. And it's not like this. But this is how God is answering. And look at the Babylonians and their attitude towards authority.

Verse 10. They mock kings. They scoff at rulers. They laugh at all fortified cities by building earthen ramps. They capture them. Kings. Kings. People given the highest positions of authority by God. They mock them. Rulers of any kind. They scoff at them. Fortified cities. They laugh at them because of their power and might. They can just capture them so easily, can't they, these Babylonians?

They're strong. Strong people. They are not God's people. God's raising them up, but they are not God's people.

[20:02] Look, they're at the end of verse 11. They are guilty people whose strength is their God's. Their God is themselves. Their own strength.

And they have a lot of it. And they love it. They worship themselves. They are number one. They are strong.

And they are powerful. They're a law unto themselves, verse 7 told us as well. They promote their own honor. It's all about themselves. It's all about me. They are not people trying to honor God at all.

So why is God allowing this? Why is God answering Habakkuk's prayer by sending an even more godless people? Why is God allowing evil to triumph?

What is going on? It fills us more with more questions than answers. Maybe Habakkuk himself is thinking, why did I ask? Two things I'd love to say from this passage.

[21:12] First of all, I've given you the answer already. I was going to say, where is Habakkuk told to look? But I'll ask you anyway. Where is Habakkuk told to look?

The nations. Yeah. To look around. Not just in his own nation. He's looking at his own nation, seeing the violence. But he's told to look around.

Look at the nations. And watch, he's told, verse 5. The Lord instructs him to take his eyes away from his own situation.

Look at the nations. And see what's going on. And he says, if you think I'm not doing anything, look and see with these Babylonians, this rising superpower.

They are being raised up and they will be used in order to judge my people who have turned from me to violence. You ask me, Habakkuk, why do you tolerate wrongdoing?

[22:20] Well, my answer is that I don't. And I am raising up people to judge. Look around the world to see what I am doing.

But as you look at them, also see that my people are behaving like this people, really. These Babylonians, they are violent.

They are a law unto themselves. And God's people, they are the same. That's not what God called them to.

God said through Moses, be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy. But that's not what they're doing right now. The law is paralyzed.

God's word is dead. So as you look, Habakkuk, and see around the world, this is nothing new.

[23:26] And for us, here today, when we cry out to God with our questions, when we wonder whether he is really answering our prayers, we can look around and see how God is working.

Maybe we'll be a bit more encouraged than Habakkuk was here. For example, we pray quite often, I think, for the Lord to build his church.

And maybe as we look at Brighton, look at our own little church here, maybe we don't quite see how that is happening. Last week, some of us were at a conference in Eastbourne, and we heard from a man called Richard Pratt, an American man who has set up a ministry called Third Millennium Ministries, which seeks to train up church leaders around the world where there is just no theological education.

And he encouraged us by saying that the church on every continent, I think he said, other than Europe and North America, is growing so, so fast in some places.

And so we can be encouraged that that prayer, Lord, build your church, is being answered. The church is growing around the world. We may not see it so much here, but it is.

[25:06] Look at the nations and see that that is happening. I wonder whether we ourselves need to be doing things like writing down prayers

with praying and writing when God answers.

To remember ourselves, God answers prayer, God is working. When we hear of others' answers to prayer, be encouraged. God is working.

Church members who are here, you've been sent trustees' annual reports. Wippee! I'm sure you're excited. But may I encourage you, if you're tempted not to read them, to actually have a look.

I was writing down the elders' annual report and I was like, oh wow, this is actually really encouraging. Looking through a whole year of our church's life. God is working.

Look around. God is working. But don't just look around. Also, I think Habakkuk's also encouraged to look up.

[26:18] Look up. Look up. See, these words here, they are words of Yahweh. They are words of the living God Almighty.

Even though they are hard words, they are really hard words. They're a bitter pill for Habakkuk to swallow. Even though they may not make sense to Habakkuk right now as he's hearing them.

They are from the everlasting God, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. He sees the beginning to the end. He holds the future. Maybe you sung.

Maybe when you were younger, he's got the whole world in his hands. I used to sing it in assembly. It's true. Be encouraged by that. That's who is speaking. And he is the one who says, I am raising up the Babylonians.

Not the Babylonians are raising themselves up. I am raising them up. I am sovereign. And it's under my control. This is all in my plan.

[27:33] Let's be encouraged by some verses from Isaiah. Isaiah 40. 21 to 26. And if someone else would love to have the microphone and read it to us, that would be lovely.

Isaiah 40. 21 to 26. Any offers? I think Jerome's offering.

Thank you. Do you not know? Do you not hear? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?

It is he who sits above the circle of the earth. And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretches out the heavens like a curtain and spreads them like a tent to dwell in.

Who brings princes to nothing and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness. Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth.

[28:42] When he blows on them and they wither and the tempest carries them off like stubble. To whom then will you compare me? That I should be like him? Says the Holy One.

Lift up your eye on high and see who created these. He who brings out their host by the number. Calling them all by name. By the greatness of his might.

And because he is strong in power, not one is missing. Thanks, Jerome. As we read those verses, we can be encouraged to lift up our eyes and see the one who is able to raise people up and bring people down.

Who raises up nations and brings them down. And he is the one whose throne will last forever.

He is the one who sits enthroned above the circle of the earth. He has been there from the beginning. Since the earth was founded.

[29:49] He is the one who is in control. There is none above him, none before him. All of time is in his hands.

That's who is in control. And so even when we don't understand what God is doing or allowing. When we cry out to God, how long?

When we cry out to the Lord, why? Why are you allowing this? Why don't you seem to be listening, Lord? We need to lift our eyes up.

In faith. And say, I bow before you. God Almighty. I trust you that you are in control of this.

Even when evil seems to be triumphing. I know that you are mighty. I know that you are on the throne. And I am going to trust you.

[31:07] Remember when the Lord Jesus was handed over to his enemies. To be brutally murdered on a cross. They must have thought, yes, we've won.

We've got him. He's dead. We're burying this one who claimed to be the king of the Jews. It felt like evil was triumphing.

For the disciples who locked themselves away in a room for fear of the authorities. They felt like evil was triumphing.

But this was God's deliberate plan and purposes for his world. For his people. For this world. For our good. For our salvation. Through the judgment that God is speaking to Habakkuk about. Using the Babylonians. God is working in them. God is working in Habakkuk's situation. And we can be sure. And we will see in Habakkuk that the wicked will not stand.

[32:19] Let's have the final word from Psalm 2.

Psalm 2. Good place to turn. And I'll read these verses.

Remember the Babylonians.

They mock kings. They scoff at rulers. Verse 4. For the one enthroned in heaven laughs. The Lord scoffs at them.

He rebukes them in his anger. And terrifies them in his wrath. Saying, I've installed my king. On Zion. My holy mountain. And then here's the conclusion of the Psalm.

[33:39] Verse 10. Therefore you kings be wise. Be warned you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear. And celebrate his rule with trembling.

Kiss his son or he will be angry. And your way will lead to your destruction. For his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

The conclusion. The conclusion. For people who are turning away from the Lord. Who think they know better. His God is themselves.

The conclusion is. Serve the Lord with fear. Bow down before me. Kiss the son. Find refuge.

Find refuge. In me. Don't be against him. That there will be times.

[34:43] When it feels like. Our prayers go on onsets. There will be times. When we. Look at our world. And wonder. What God are you doing?

There will be times in our lives. That we. We see things going on. That will make us scratch our heads. God. God. What are you doing? There are times.

Even right now. When we see nations are warring. When it feels like the church is struggling. We feel like. Our loved ones.

Are going through trials. Or we ourselves. Are going through something nasty. God. What are you doing? There will be times. When it feels like. Evil is triumphing.

And God is not there. Doing anything. Feels like our prayers. Are hitting. Just a brick wall. Rather than being heard. By almighty God. I think Habakkuk.

[35:43] Helps us. Instead of. Burying our heads down. In the sand. And pretend it's not going on. Or running around. In a panic. Habakkuk.

Habakkuk helps us. Doesn't he? To call out to him. To ask those questions. Why? How long? But also to know.

That God is God. That he is the one. Raising up the Babylonians. That he is the one. In control.

That he is the one. Seated on his throne. And though he may be working.

In mysterious ways. He is working his wonders. To perform. And so we can. Watch it. And wait. And be utterly amazed.

By his big plan. For the world. We need to trust him. For that. And we must humbly. Bow down and say. I am not God. But I know you are.

[36:43] And I trust you. And that won't always be easy. But with the Lord's help. We can.

I am going to stop there. And. Be good to pray. In a moment. But firstly.

Let's just take. A few moments. Just to be quiet. Ourselves. The Lord will have been. Speaking to us. In different ways. Maybe. Speaking.

Showing us. Some hard things. Challenging us. Encouraging us. Maybe. Maybe think of. Of one particular thing. That you want to make sure. You don't forget.

Take through. Into the week. And. And pray about that. In these. Next.

[37:39] Minutality. And then I'll. Lead us in a prayer. Be.

Gods. The one. Enthroned. Above the circle. Of the earth. We come. Before you. To you.

We are. Like tiny. Grasshoppers. For you. Stretch out. The heavens. Like a canopy. And. Spread them out. Like a tent.

To live in. You bring princes. To naught. And you reduce. The rulers. Of this world. To nothing. You are the one. We come to. You are the one.

We look up to. And so father. We. We come before your throne. Once again. And we look at.

[38:34] This world. And. We wonder. Why do you tolerate. The evil. That is going on. What are you doing. Lord. Lord.

We cry out. For peace. But it feels like. There is. No peace. But Lord. We thank you. That this world. Is in your hands.

You are sovereign. Over all things. We thank you. That you know. What the future. Brings. And we do not.

Father. We pray. That you would help us. To bow down. Before you. And to trust you. And we thank you. Father. That when it feels like.

Evil is triumphing. You. Are triumphing. You are the one. Who is in control. Of all things. We see that. At the cross. Lord. Where your purposes.

[39:36] For our salvation. Were being worked out. Lord. Help us. Not to forget the cross. Help us to remember. And to rejoice. In the Lord Jesus.

Our savior. And our great salvation. Help us through this week. In whatever we are going to face.

As we don't know. You do. Help us this week. To look to you. To look around. And see the different ways. You are working. And to look up.

To your throne. Where you are seated. And in control. Lord. We praise you. That this. Is you.

This is who our God is. Help us to trust you. And we ask this. In Jesus name. Amen. We are going to sing two songs.

[40:36] Before we finish this evening.