

How Long O Lord?

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[0 : 00] find it helpful if you have a Bible with you to turn to these verses in the first chapter of the prophecy of Habakkuk or Habakkuk. There are different ways to pronounce it, I think.

One of my boys once told me when I preached through the book of Habakkuk 25 years ago, he said that I pronounced his name five different ways in the sermon. I'm sure that was a slight exaggeration, but I may vary between Habakkuk and Habakkuk, so you'll forgive the inconsistency.

The church of God in this world has always been subject to risings and fallings. There has never been a time when the church has uniformly, consistently, made its way through this world in an even way. It's always either rising or falling.

That's true at an individual level. We never stand still as Christian believers. We are either rising or we are falling. It's true at a congregational level. Congregations never stay the same. Maybe outwardly it appears to be so. But the truth is we are either rising or we are falling.

And that's true denominational. It's true nationally. It's true cosmically. This is the reality of belonging to the church of God in a fallen, hostile world, yet battling with the reality of indwelling sin.

[2 : 00] Our greatest enemy lies within us. And we know only too well, if we are Christian believers at all, that there isn't a day we are not battling with the reality and the pool of indwelling sin.

The seduction of a passing, godless world and the sinister activity of the devil himself. The church is always rising or it's falling.

And this very much is the context of the prophecy of Habakkuk. We're in the latter years of the 7th century before Christ. For some time, God's covenant people, his old covenant church, has been spiraling downwards in every conceivable way.

It hadn't stopped being religious. It hadn't stopped its services and its sacrifices. But they were an abomination to God.

Read the first chapter of Isaiah. Your prayer meetings, your services, your sacrifices, I vomit them out of my mouth, says the Lord.

[3 : 17] Because all of their religious paraphernalia was a smokescreen for hearts that had departed far from him. You worship me with your lips, Jesus said, quoting Isaiah 29, well, your hearts are far from me.

So in Habakkuk's day, the services were still being performed, the sacrifices were still being offered, prayers were still being made.

But the nation and the church within the nation was spiraling downwards in moral and spiritual and theological declension.

Added to that, added to that, the great superpower of the day, Babylon, was lurking on the boundaries of Israel, waiting to devour God's people, which it would do about 20 or so years after Habakkuk writes this prophecy.

Up till now, Assyria and Egypt had been the great superpower in the Near East, and Israel often was trying to buy its way into the favour of these superpowers.

[4 : 36] But now Babylon had come on the scene. And in the year 606 BC, at the Battle of Carchemish, it had destroyed the power of Egypt.

And now Babylon was the world's superpower. And it was looking to gobble up little Israel. And so you have internal tragedy, moral and spiritual and theological decline.

So much so that Habakkuk says in verse 4, God's law is paralysed. Justice never goes forth. The wicked surround the righteous.

Justice goes forth perverted. This is the people to whom God had come and given his holy law, made known his gospel, instituted the whole sacrificial system that would point them forward one day to a saviour who would come and be himself the final end-time sacrifice for sin.

But now God was not in all their thoughts. And Habakkuk is perplexed.

[5 : 51] And he's perplexed because he doesn't understand why God isn't doing anything about it. And so the first chapter, and I simply want to walk through the first chapter with you and then consider four applications that we can draw from the chapter.

As we walk through the chapter, we find Habakkuk making two complaints to God. He's very bold. Verses 2-4 and then verses 12-17 are God's servants' complaints to God.

The first complaint in verses 2-4 is answered or at least responded to by the Lord himself in verses 5-11. And then the second complaint is answered really in the rest of the book of Habakkuk.

Although the answer is not quite what Habakkuk was expecting. Look briefly at the first complaint. Verses 2-4. O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear?

I keep praying and praying and praying and praying and you're not doing anything to help.

[7 : 21] That was the whole point of speaking to the children. Psalm 44. The psalmist there is puzzled with God. He said, Lord, have you fallen asleep? Why don't you awake?

Why don't you rouse yourself? Why don't you do something? And this is Habakkuk's problem. He sees destruction and violence. Verse 2.

He sees God's law being paralyzed. And he doesn't understand it. He says, Lord, why are you not stepping in and dealing with the ungodly and the wicked and the vile and the unrighteous?

Lord, why are you not coming to the aid of your faithful people? Why? Why? Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear?

I wonder if that resonates with you. Maybe some of us here are saying, Lord, I've cried for many a day, many a year, but you've not stepped in to answer.

[8 : 32] Lord, why? How long? You see the honesty of God's prophet? Well, then in verses 5 through 11, and we'll be coming back to this a little bit, the Lord responds to his servant's complaint.

But he responds in a way that must have dumbfounded Habakkuk. Do nothing, Habakkuk. Verse 5. Look among the nations, see and wonder.

Be astounded. I'm doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. I'm not indolent. I'm not asleep.

I'm not indifferent. I'm mightily and powerfully at work among the nations. You would be astounded to know what I'm doing, Habakkuk.

The problem is that from verse 6 onwards, what God says must have furthered Habakkuk's perplexity because this is what God is saying in his response to Habakkuk.

[9 : 45] He's saying, I'm doing something great. Do you know what it is, Habakkuk? I'm raising up the Chaldeans, the Babylonians. That bitter and hasty nation.

Verse 11. Guilty men whose own might is their God. I'm raising up the mighty power of Babylon to bring my judgment on my covenant people to church.

He's perplexed. Now the perplexity deepens. So you're not inactive, Lord. No, I'm mightily at work. I'm doing a work in your days you would not believe if told.

Lord, what is that work? What is the work? I'm raising up a godless nation to bring my judgment on my covenant privileged people. That's an answer to prayer, isn't it?

I'm not sure Habakkuk was expecting that. And so Habakkuk has a second complaint verses 12 to 17.

[10 : 54] He's trying to process what he's been hearing. Lord, I've come to you. I've asked how long. I've asked why you're not hearing my prayers.

I've asked why you've not stepped in to rescue your church from wicked men who are perverting your law. And now you're telling me you're raising up godless Babylon to overwhelm us and crush us and judge us.

And so he begins a second complaint very strikingly with these words. Are you not from everlasting? O Lord, my God, my Holy One, we shall not die.

You have ordained them as a judgment and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. But here's the thing. But you're of purer eyes than to look on evil and cannot do wrong.

Now I would guess that many of us know that text. The Lord is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. And we take it as a text that celebrates the purity and the holiness of God.

[12 : 03] Not at all. In the context, it's a problem for Habakkuk. Lord, you're of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. Well, what on earth are you doing raising up an iniquitous, godless, wicked nation to judge your people?

We're bad. Yes, we're bad. Look at verse 13. But the Babylonians are worse. Why do you idly look at traitors, remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

We're bad, Lord, but we're more righteous than the godless Babylonians. And you're of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. He's trying to make sense of who God is with what God is doing.

And he can't understand it. He's puzzled by it. There's a refreshing honesty, unsettling honesty about Habakkuk, isn't there?

He doesn't just trot out well-worn theology. He's saying, Lord, my theology seems to be contradicted by my circumstances.

[13 : 23] Who you say you are seems to be contradicted by what you're doing. Lord, help me to understand this.

Help me to make sense of how you who are of purer eyes than to look on evil and who cannot do wrong. Help me to make sense of this. That you're going to raise up the godless Babylonians.

Look at verse 16. Who sacrifice to their nets. Who make offerings to their dragnets. It's a poetic picture of the power and the might and the military might of Babylon as they swept through the Near East.

they were genuflecting to their military prowess. Look what our hands have done. They mercilessly, verse 17, kill nations forever.

The end of verse 11, whose own light is their God. And for Habakkuk, this is a real problem. If you're living the Christian life problem free, tell me your secret.

[14 : 37] I don't find it in the Bible. I find at times anguish. I find at times bewilderment. I find even my blessed Saviour saying, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

here is a man who's complaining, not unbelievably. He's not complaining as an unbeliever, but as a true believer.

Look what he says in verse 12. Are you not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One? He's a believer.

He's a man of God. But he's in anguish at the ways of God. He looks around him and he cannot make sense of his theology.

He knows that God is sovereign. He knows the Lord is God. He knows what God has promised concerning his people in Christ.

[15 : 48] But all his circumstances seem to mock who God is and what God says. So he says, beginning of chapter 2, I will take my stand at my watch post, station myself on the tower and look out to see what he will say to me.

I'm going to wait for God to explain things. Now interestingly, if you know the book of Habakkuk, God doesn't explain anything.

There's no explanation. None at all. It's crystallized in verse 4 of chapter 2. Behold, his, that is, the Babylonian soul is puffed up.

It's not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by his faith. What God is going to say to Habakkuk in the rest of the book is this, Habakkuk, live by faith and not by sight.

That is to say, live your life trusting me when all around your soul is giving way. Live your life believing me when there's nothing to encourage you to believe me except who I am and what I have done for you.

[17 : 18] The righteous shall live by faith. Actually, there's no such thing as faith. There's only faith in God.

Faith takes a direct object. Theologically, if not always grammatically. Faith in God. Faith in Jesus Christ. The glory of the Christian religion is not that we are justified by faith, but they were justified by Jesus Christ and we receive that justification through faith alone.

We'll think about that tonight. So God's not going to give him an answer and say, well, okay, let me sit you down and let me explain to you step by step what I'm doing.

All the Lord says is Habakkuk, trust me. And so right at the very end of the book, the prophet writes, though the fig trees should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the product of the olive fail, 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.

I will take joy in the God of my salvation. He's been brought to a place where he's ready to say, Lord, though this world disintegrates around me, and, can I quote Job, though you slay me, yet will I trust you.

[18 : 50] Though everything falls apart, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. there are four truths, I think, that shine out from these verses in chapter one.

Number one, be prayerful. This is what Habakkuk is doing here. He doesn't sit himself or go off with others and berate God for his apparent inaction.

He prays, he takes it to the Lord in prayer. Be prayerful. Isn't that what our Lord Jesus Christ did?

Isn't he the perfect example of one who, when all around his soul was giving way, took his desolation to his heavenly Father in prayer?

You'll know on the cross that Jesus is quoting the 22nd Psalm. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me from the words of my groaning?

[20 : 12] Oh my God, I cry by day but you do not answer and by night but I find no rest. yet you are holy enthroned in the praises of Israel.

This is Habakkuk. Habakkuk is a type of Jesus Christ. In our Lord Jesus' extremity, what does he do?

He cries out to God in prayer. Often it's in prayer that we begin sometimes we begin to make sense of the Lord's ways with us and with others but often times it's not that we begin to make sense of them, it's that we begin to see God more clearly for who he is.

In prayer the discomobulation of our minds begins to calm and we begin to remember Lord, you are the holy one, the high and holy one who inhabits eternity.

There is none like unto you, O God, in the heavens above or on the earth beneath. Your ways are higher than my ways, your thoughts than my thoughts. be prayerful in your bewilderments and perplexities.

[21 : 40] Take it to the Lord in prayer, not for easy answers, but to have your minds and hearts reshaped and refashioned and reformed as you begin to remind yourselves and be reminded by God himself of who he is.

too often we come to the Bible to find ourselves when we should be coming to the Bible to find our God. Be prayerful.

Second, be hopeful. You see what the Lord is saying here to Habakkuk? He's saying I am raising up the Babylonians. The Babylonians are not doing their awful superpower work under their own steam.

God has raised them up. He is ordering their ways mysteriously but predestinatingly God is ordaining all things. You see the sovereignty of God is not a doctrine or a truth that's intended to puzzle us, perplex us, crush us.

It's intended to lift up our hearts not because we understand it. But isn't the glory of the sovereignty of God this, that the God who ordains all that comes to pass is my loving heavenly father who spared not his only son but who delivered him up to Calvary's cross for me to save me from a lost eternity and to bring me into his family and ultimately into his presence.

[23 : 24] The sovereignty of God is a pillow to lie on, not a perplexity or a puzzle to try and solve. You've just got a sore head trying to make sense of the sovereignty of God, rejoice in it, revel in it.

Know that your life is not ultimately subject to the Babylonians of this world or to the governments of this world. Your life is ultimately hid with Christ and God.

Your life and your times are in his hands. Psalm 31. The sovereignty of God is a glorious truth, not something to shrink from, but to run to.

It's a wonderfully pastorally reassuring doctrine. Some years ago I was ministering in Brazil at a reform conference and met a family there.

They were originally American missionaries, they'd made their life in Brazil. A remarkable family, they had gone there 20 years before and the father in the family and one of his sons had been shot dead by bandits because they wouldn't pay protection money.

[24 : 44] And the family that was left, the wife, she had three children left, two of the children had subsequently ten children each and another of the children had seven, they were quite a clan.

And they were all at this conference and I immediately hit off with them and I had a wonderful time. And when I returned to Scotland, I heard the news that Jim, who was the grandson of the man who was murdered by bandits, who'd been married for fourteen months, who had a wife and a little one-month-old baby, had been travelling back from the conference and he was killed in a car accident.

Well, I thought I must contact this family. And in the Lord's kindness, I managed to track them down in the upper Amazon through a field telephone. And I'm thinking, how can I comfort them, encourage them?

I thought, I think I'm just going to cry the whole time I speak with them. So I phoned and the mother answered. I said, it's Ian Hamilton.

Oh, she says, Ian, it's lovely to hear you. Before I could say anything, she said, our pastor has flown in. Now, they're up the Amazon, so the pastor has to fly three hours or so to get to them.

[26 : 11] And he says, and she said to me, Ian, it's wonderful. He's reading to us from Wilhelmus a brackle. Dutch Second Reformation pastor theologian.

He's reading to us from a brackle on predestination and God is wonderfully comforting our hearts. I just cried.

I thought, isn't that remarkable? A late 17th century Dutch pastor theologian writing on predestination is comforting broken hearts in the upper Amazon as they consider the sovereignty of God.

We can be hopeful because our God is King. He is the Lord. Nothing happens out with his sovereign good pleasure and purpose.

thirdly, be humble, be prayerful, be hopeful, thirdly, be humble. God's ways are not our ways.

[27 : 22] He's not a bigger version of you or of me. Remember Psalm 50, you thought I was just like you. He isn't like us. His ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not our thoughts.

His ways are higher than our ways, his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. And that humbles us, doesn't it? That humbles us.

We need to learn humility before God. We need to do justly, to love mercy. And what's the next bit, Micah?

And to walk humbly before God. We don't have all the answers. We're not Christians because we've got answers for everything. We're Christians because the Son of God loved us and gave himself for us.

Christians are perplexed, puzzled. We need to cultivate the grace of godly humility.

[28 : 26] It's one of the prize graces, isn't it? Augustine, the great late fourth, early fifth century church father was once asked, what are the three great Christian graces?

Jesus. And he replied, humilitas, humilitas, humilitas, humility, humility, humility.

You know what humility is? It's letting God be God. The humble may be bold and courageous and outgoing and effervescent, humility's got nothing to do with temperament.

humility. It's got everything to do with theology. Humility is saying, it is the Lord. He's good.

And one day he will explain all to me. I see through a glass darkly now, but one day face to face. Be humble.

[29 : 25] And then fourthly, be patient. Be patient. That's what Habakkuk is saying beginning of chapter two.

I will take my stand at my watch post, station myself in the tower and look out to see what he will say to me. I'm going to be patient. And when the Lord begins to respond in chapter two, he says to Habakkuk in verse three, the vision awaits its appointed time.

It hastens to the end. It will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it. It will surely come. Be patient.

Be willing to let God be God. Again, patience isn't something that's temperamental.

we're not born with it. It's one of the fruit of the spirit. Patience. Let God do his work in his own way, in his own time.

[30 : 35] One day it will be a revelation, won't it? When the Lord explains everything. And we'll just stand, won't we? We'll just stand and we'll just, we'll probably say nothing, we'll just, we'll just be open mouthed with wonder.

I didn't know. I didn't know. I didn't know. Be patient. Joan will be a little embarrassed with this, but when I first got to know my wife, I went to visit her in a little flat in Glasgow.

And I noticed pinned up on one of the walls were the verses of a hymn. We actually sang the hymn at our wedding.

It was one of my favourite hymns. She didn't know that at the time. I remember seeing the words, put thou thy trust in God, in duty's path, go on.

Wait thou his time, so shall thy night soon end in joyous day. Give to the winds thy fears, hope and be undismayed.

[31 : 55] God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears. God shall lift up thy head.

Patience waiting on God. You're looking for a new pastor, I know. Maybe you're thinking, my, it's taking a long time.

Be patient. Wait for the Lord to provide the right man at the right time. Though it tarry, wait for it.

Be faithful, be hopeful, be prayerful, be patient. Be patient. Trust the one who bankrupted glory to bring us salvation in his son, Jesus Christ.

May God bless to us his word this morning. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.