

Facing Your Fears

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Preacher: Campbell Brown

[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening everyone. I know I welcomed you at the start. Let me welcome you again. It's particularly nice to see people visiting here.

It's a special thing to have visitors in church. And we hope that you feel very welcome. We hope that you will be spoken to through the word as we go through it.

And what I want to do, I've sort of alluded to this. I want to go through a little bit of Habakkuk chapter 3, particularly from verse 16 onwards.

But before I do that, I want to explain why this, because it's not an everyday kind of thing. It's not one of those passages that gets preached on time and time again.

And, well, the reason for it is it comes out of what's been happening in the world and in this society over the last two or three years. Because I don't do services very often, but when I do, I've been dealing with the things that are in front of me at the time.

[1 : 1 0] And in the last few years, that hasn't been easy. Because there haven't been simple things. There haven't been easy things. And it's been things like where we've lost people in this church.

They're loved by us. They're part of our Christian family. And there's a lot of impact on that, not just on the family themselves, but in the church as well.

It's been a time of isolation and loneliness for some. And there's a lot of consequences of that, because it brings about maybe an absence of love, an absence of companionship in people's lives. It's also a world that never has been clearer in my time that desperately needs to hear and respond to the Bible that we preach.

But it just doesn't. Particularly in this country, it just seems to get worse and worse. And last time, last month that I took a service here, I was asking the question why bad things happen to good people.

[2 : 1 7] And it is very important that we do these things. But the problem is, when you're the one that's doing them, to do them as well as you can, you have to immerse yourself in that. And what that does is, it has a personal toll.

And when I look at ministers who have to do this week in and week out, I don't know how they cope. And I think maybe the lesson is that maybe some of them don't cope.

Either some or a lot of the time. So when I was trying to think what I would do this evening, I wanted to do something that was a bit more encouraging. Something that was a bit more uplifting.

And providentially, the last time I was here, I ended up referring to the last three verses in Habakkuk as I concluded what I had to say.

And as I was trying to work out over the last few weeks, what I was going to say, there was a gradual realization that what I needed to do was look at these verses in a bit more detail to have that impact of positivity and encouragement again.

[3 : 2 6] But before I do that, just a very quick recap. Because when we look back at Habakkuk, at the start of the chapter, I only looked at the first chapter, we find him in a pretty low state, a pretty discouraged state.

Or to use the images of the book itself. He started off and he was in the valley. He was an impatient man. He looked at the society around him.

It's badness. It was corrupt. It was a godless society. It was a society which exploited the poor for personal gain. And he wanted action.

And he wanted it right now. And if you look at chapter 1, verse 1. Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? And he was annoyed about that.

He was angry. And then when we get to verse 13, second half. Why do you idly look at traders and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

[4 : 33] So there was an annoyance with God's way. And he worked through this. We talked about his methodology for how he did it. And eventually what we find at the start of chapter 2 is he realizes that all he can do, there's nothing more that he can do.

So he says, I will stand at my watch post and station myself at the tower and look to see what he will say to me and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

And this is where he was. But by the time we get to chapter 3, things had moved on. He knew what was going on. And he knew what was to come.

He had an understanding of this terrible judgment and why it was required. And he understood that it had to happen. And he understood as well that it was God's judgment.

But when he reflected on that, we see somebody who sunk even lower than what he was at the start of chapter 1. Look at verse 1. Or sorry, verse 2 of chapter 3.

[5 : 38] And then if you look at verse 16.

So he had gone from annoyed, impatient, confused to somebody who was living his life in fear.

And it was a very genuine fear. And we see that because of the way it manifested itself. And I think it manifested itself in two ways. One, in a very physical way that is what you would expect.

His body trembled. His lips quivered. His legs were unsteady and shaking. And this is an entirely natural response to fear.

Because what the body does is when it feels fear, the brain reacts by releasing stress hormones. And what that does is it leads to things like increased blood pressure, increased heart rates, faster breathing.

[6 : 51] So the body reacts in a certain way physically. But it also shuts down areas. Meaning that it's difficult in these situations to think clearly, to make rational decisions or to think about things in a rational and sensible way.

So I think his physical response to his fear was entirely normal and natural in a physical way. But I think it was also entirely normal and natural in a spiritual sense as well.

Because I don't think that his fear that he felt was in the main about the concern of the Babylonians coming and taking and destroying his nation.

I think the bigger fear that he had was because he had heard from God what God's judgment was going to be on his people. And when we look at other examples of people responding to God's judgment in the Bible, they responded in very similar ways.

We look at David. And he spent so much of his life living in fear and on the run. And when fear took a hold of him, it made him do silly things.

[8 : 07] And when he was running from Saul, where did he end up? He ended up in Goliath's hometown, carrying Goliath's sword in the hope that nobody would notice he was there.

And then when they did notice, surprisingly, he feigned madness to try and get away. I'll not read it, but if you want to go to Daniel chapter 7 and 8, what happens there is Daniel receives a vision from the Lord.

And it's quite a scary vision. It's not one that you would like to read in your bedtime story. And then shortly after that, the angel Gabriel comes to explain to him what this vision means.

And we see it affected Daniel physically there. It says his countenance changed. He fainted and he lay in bed sick for days at the judgment that God had proclaimed in that.

Maybe I will read this one, but turn with me if you have your Bibles to Luke chapter 22. And this is when Jesus is...

[9 : 13] Is it Luke chapter... No, it's not Luke chapter 22. This is where Jesus is in the garden. And he's praying.

He's praying to God. Sorry, I can't... I've got the wrong reference here. But he's praying to God. And he asked for this cup to be taken from him.

And there is a physical and spiritual manifestation there. Because we're told that he was in so much pain that his sweat became like big drops of blood. So Habakkuk, he was feeling fear.

And it had a physical manifestation, but a spiritual one as well, which is entirely consistent with the physiology of your body. But also the spiritual experience of other Christians as well.

So in one way, Habakkuk had been transformed in a bad way. He'd started off, as I said, as impatient, annoyed, wanting God to do something.

[10:14] He's not liking the answers he's got. And what we see him here, he's struck with fear as a result of the revelation of God. But yet, if we go back to Habakkuk, it's not the last transformation he has.

Because he transforms again in verse 18 and 19, where he says, Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will take joy in the God of my salvation.

God the Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the deers. He makes me tread on my high places. So he's transformed in two different ways through this chapter.

And where he ends up, it's a wonderful thing. Because he changed from what he was, from this fearful man to somebody who was positive, to somebody who was content.

To somebody who was comparing himself to a light and sure-footed deer walking in the high mountaintops. It's a wonderful image. It says it's hopeful. And I think it's almost outrageous in a good way.

[11:19] Because nothing has changed in the situation he was in. He still had this evil society that he was in. This corrupt and evil one.

He was still seeing every day the exploitation of the weak. His nation was still turning their back on God. And the punishment for this was still in place.

And that was a horrible punishment. It was total destruction of a nation. Its people. Its economy. Its social structure. Its ability to sustain itself. And its ability to worship God.

So what is the positive thing that I want to talk about or focus on tonight from the back of that? Well, I think what it is is how did he get from where he was? And I think there's five things that he did.

And the first thing that he did is, I'm not going to go through them all. But if you look really from verse 2 until the end of verse 15, he looks back. Now, I don't know if you saw on the TV recently, there was an advert for the upcoming Jubilee celebrations.

[12:35] And there was a clip played where the Queen was quoting Winston Churchill. And Winston Churchill said, the farther backward you can look, the farther forward you can see.

Now, this is my kind of thing. And I'd never heard that quote. So I went to check it. And yes, he did say that. And he said other things which were very similar.

And I found another quote which is slightly different depending where you look. And I think what happened was he used the same quote twice in different ways. But he said, those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

But Habakkuk, he was saying, I think, something very similar. Because he looks back and he learns from history. And I think this is something as a church that we, or maybe not this church, but maybe a church as a whole that we don't do very well.

We don't look back often enough and in the right way. Sometimes we're just so busy. We've got the next big event coming out. We've got the next outreach event that we want to do.

[13:43] There's the next church plant coming. There's a new building that we have to find. And what we don't do is look back at how God has worked in our lives. I think as well there's a view amongst some churches wrongly that it's wrong to look back at all.

And look with me. Well, you don't have to look. But listen, Philippians chapter 3, verse 13, where it says there, Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.

Or Luke chapter 9, verse 62. Jesus said to him, no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven.

And there's other examples. There's Lot's wife who was punished for looking back. So there is a view, and it's a wrong view, that it's wrong to look back at all. Yes, there are times where we should always be looking forward.

But there are ways where it's right and proper to look back as well. Sometimes what we do is we cherry pick history. And we pick at the bits that we know that seem to verify our forward view of the world and where the church is going.

[15:06] Sometimes we just don't know enough about the past. And we rely on lessons of a narrow period or a narrow event. And miss the wider lessons that people can bring.

But Habakkuk, he didn't make these mistakes. His approach teaches us that not only is it good to look back and learn, but it's absolutely imperative and vital that we do.

And he also shows how it could be done, because he was a good historian. As all you know, I'm a history grad. I love the subject. And there's good and there's bad history.

So not only does he do it, but he does it very well. Because he looks over a broad period. He looks over hundreds and hundreds of years of history. And not only does he do that, but what he looks at is the right thing, because he looks at God's working through that time.

And if I summarize that, he looks at the facts. And he learns from that. And I think he learns a couple of things from looking back. And I'm not going to go through them or pull them out.

[16:11] But in that chapter 3, he sees God's splendor and awesomeness. He refers to God as the Holy One. He talks about how his glory covered the heavens.

He talks about how his appearance is like lightning in the sky that's both amazing and wonderful and scary all at the same time. He talks about how his appearance is like sunrise, only much brighter than better.

So he learns about, he looks back and he learns about God's splendor and awesomeness. He looks back and he sees God's power. He looks at how God brought the plagues to Egypt to not only show God's power, but to show the lack of power of Egypt people or God's.

And then we see him in this chapter, he's measuring up the earth and that implies an image of ownership and control. And he's looking at the enemy he faces and he sees what needs to be done and how much power he needs to use to execute his plans.

And when the nations see that, when they see his splendor and his power and his ownership of this world, they are both startled and they tremble with fear. And I think the final thing he sees is he sees that God is a God of victory.

[17:31] In whatever circumstances, whether that be leaving Egypt, whether it be working his way through the wilderness and into the promised land, he conquered all that went before him. Even, and it's a reference to Joshua chapter 10, that he caused the sun and the moon to stand still to facilitate his victory in that situations.

And Habakkuk looks back and he sees nations were trampled. The wicked were destroyed and scattered. And Habakkuk, walking through all this, he reminds himself that God is a God of victory. And ultimately, even in these worst of times that he was facing, that God would bring about his victory in this situation as well. And that's what Habakkuk did.

I think the first thing was he looked back. He saw his God as awesome and wonderful and so powerful and that nothing could stand up to him. He looked back and he could see that God always wins and that even in the worst times, he would bring victory too.

So that's the first thing he did. And he did that in the first chapter as well. He looked back and he reminded himself about the attributes of God and God's working in history. But the second thing he did, and I want you to look with me, he waited.

[18:56] He waited on God. And remember, he had started out as an impatient prophet who was stamping his feet, impatient that he didn't have an answer. He was a prophet who started off as well with the short-term view of history because all he could see what was happening in the here and now and what was going to happen when the Babylonians invaded.

But now he had changed. He was happy to wait on the Lord's timetable. He was happy to accept that God's way was inevitable and best for him.

And he did not know the date. He didn't know the time. He didn't know the hour. He maybe even didn't understand why it had to happen. But he was happy to wait on God and God's timetable.

And if I could say anything, learn from Habakkuk here. In your life, be still. Just take some time. Be still and wait on God.

Don't run ahead of him or lose patience with his plan for you. Because history tells us, if you do what Habakkuk did and look back at history, history tells us that it will go badly for you if you do.

[20:08] And if you want some examples of that, look at Abraham when he decided to have a child with Hagar because he had given up waiting for God. Or Jacob stealing his birthright from Esau when God had already promised it to him.

And they wouldn't wait for that. And there was consequences of that both in their day with families that were broken and destroyed and full of distrust and concern for each other.

But if you look back, you can see that some of these problems are still affecting the world in this day and age as well. So wait for God. And just maybe, I was thinking of situations, just maybe you're impatient because you're looking for that perfect home and you can't find it.

Just maybe it's a job or a promotion that you want and just no opportunities that are there. Just maybe, you see, you're at that age and all your friends are off getting married and you want that for

yourself too.

And there is no one there for you. Or maybe it's a much wanted family that just isn't happening. And I can't promise that if you wait that you'll get the answer you want.

[21 : 23] But what Habakkuk's example is and what I can promise is that if you wait for God, his timetable, it will be best for you. His outcome will be best for you and right for you, whatever the outcome of that would be.

So those are the two things. He looked back and he reminded himself about the God he loved. He waited on God. And the third thing, if we look at verse 17, or verse 18 actually, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

I will take joy in the God of my salvation. So he rejoiced. And he was able to rejoice because he was a patient prophet now. And I think by this time the indication is that the Babylonian invasion had started or underway.

The society, the world he was in was destroyed in a way that we could barely comprehend. The agricultural system had been destroyed. So there wasn't any food.

So even if they wanted to live in this part of the world and were able to, they couldn't because there was nothing to eat. Even the rulers of society, and if you like the most capable of society, had been taken away into captivity.

[22 : 41] But yet in all these situations, he was able to rejoice in the Lord. And notice in this case, because sometimes I think we get this wrong, he wasn't rejoicing in his blessings because there wasn't that many here.

Life was hard. Life was horrible. So he wasn't rejoicing in these things. He was rejoicing in God. And he was rejoicing because God is God. And he was rejoicing because he looked back and he could see what God had done.

And he had confidence that God would come through again. He was rejoicing because he knew his God was just and perfect. He was rejoicing because God had made promises to his covenant people and he knew that he would keep them.

He was rejoicing because God could not change his characteristics of holiness and compassion and action. And he was rejoicing because God was in control.

And even in these circumstances, there's something about being able to rejoice in this way.

Because it seems to set people free. It seems to set them free from their troubles and their concerns.

[23 : 52] And it's a rejoicing because it will take us through even the worst of times to the best outcome for us, for whatever that is for us.

So that's the first three points. And the fourth and fifth thing that he does, I'll take them together because the first thing is what he doesn't do. And the second thing is what he does do. Because what he doesn't do, what he doesn't do when we get to the stage in the chapter is he doesn't use his own techniques to deal with his fear.

And we all have techniques to deal with fear. And we use different ones at different times. For example, one thing that he doesn't do here is he doesn't pretend that the issue he's scared about doesn't exist.

Or he doesn't just try and avoid it as if it's not there. Now, we have loads of American people in here. So quiz question. Who was the third president of the USA? Thomas Jefferson.

You're right. Now, this seems remarkable in this day and age, but he was the third president of the USA and he was petrified of public speaking. Could you imagine that today?

[25 : 09] And there's loads of speeches of Thomas Jefferson, but they were all written out. And the only two instances we know of him in public speaking was his two inauguration speeches after he had won the election.

And that's what he did. He was petrified of public speaking, so he didn't do it. And that's one thing that we do. The second thing that we do is we face fear head on. Now, apologies if you don't know this game, but the best game in the world.

In my younger days, I was a rugby player. And I was never the biggest, the fastest, the heaviest, or the most skillful in the teams that I played in. And I don't care who you are, but when you're standing on a pitch and somebody who's 6 foot 5 and 19 stone with a pattern of maybe 4 meters is running straight at you.

And when they're that big, they don't even have the decency of running around you. They just go through you. That's what happens. Well, I play that. And I don't care who you are. You're scared when that happens.

You feel the fear. And the way that I used to deal with that was I used to ask our kicker, the person who kicked off to start the match, I used to ask him to land the ball on the biggest, ugliest beast that there was.

[26 : 21] And I would be there at the same time at the ball, and I would hit that person as hard as I could. And I knew if I did that, that I would be okay for the rest of the match.

I faced my fear that way by just taking on the hardest thing that I knew. That's another way we face our fears. The other thing that we do is we just resign ourselves to the issue.

It's a kind of case or ah, sirrah, whatever it will be, will be attitude. There's nothing that we can do with it, so we just live with it. And these are three common techniques that we use.

But the problem with all of those techniques is that they rely on our own strength and our own wisdom. And as a result, no matter how well we do them, they'll always be deficient or wrong in some way.

And that is what Habakkuk had been doing. He had been relying on his own devices, on his own motions, on his own emotions. And when he did that, his fear was overwhelming. But what changed Habakkuk was instead of relying on his own devices, he relied on God.

[27 : 25] And as a result of that, instead of legs of jelly, he had strength to stand firm and move freely in the most difficult of terrain. He had started relying on God, and he was able to rise above all these issues that he was facing each and every day because he was relying on God.

So those are the things he didn't do and the things that he did. And to summarize, because my time's up, if I take all of this together, Habakkuk ended up in this wonderful place.

Not because the circumstances had changed, because they hadn't. They were as bad as what they were at the start of the book. But Habakkuk ended up in this wonderful place because he had changed.

He had gone from this concerned, impatient questioner of God. Then he had fallen into a debilitating fear. And somebody who was a quivering wreck and could hardly function.

And we find him at the end, he had overcome these things. Because what he had done was he had put his faith and trust in the one thing that would not let him down. And that was God.

[28 : 34] And it's almost like one of these process maps you see in work. I work in a bank and we have loads of process maps. We love process maps. We live by them. But it was one of those circular ones, those everlasting circular ones, that he looked back to see what he knew about God.

And because he saw that God works over the longer period, and because he saw that God always wins out, that meant that he was able to wait on God and wait for his time scale and wait for his plans to work out.

And because he was able to do those two things, he was able to rejoice in the wonderful God that he had. Because he could see the bigger picture. And because he was able to look back and wait and rejoice, he was able to rely on God.

And then it starts all over again. Because he was relying on God, he was able to wait for him. He was able to rejoice. And it just goes round and round and round. And because he did these things, he was able to walk in what verse 19 tells us is this high spiritual place.

And when I go right back to the start and say the desire to talk about something a bit positive and uplifting, this is what it is. And it's positive and uplifting, I think, for a number of reasons.

[29 : 52] But Habakkuk had that faith now that when you see it in somebody, somebody else, you recognize it because it's compelling, it's wonderful. It's something that you wish that you had yourself.

And the amazing thing is, from this chapter, is that it tells us that that's what God wants for you too. And the other amazing thing about this chapter is that Christianity is not an elite religion.

This sort of higher faith isn't for the best. It's achievable for everybody. If you would only put your trust in God and leave it to him and understand that his ways are best for you.

And if you look at this chapter, it tells us that God wants us to run freely in high places, this chapter tells us. If you look at Isaiah, he tells us he wants us to mount up with wings like eagles and fly.

That's what he wants for your spiritual faith. He wants you to be in these high places. And this chapter tells us how we get there. But I think I'll leave the last word to the psalmist because we're

going to sing this to finish off.

[31 : 07] But look at Psalm 18. Again, he makes my feet like feet of deer. Upon the heights he makes me stand. My arms can bend a bow of bronze.

In skills of war he trains my hand. Another verse. For who is God except the Lord? Besides our God who is the rock. He is the God who gives me strength.

And he perfects the path I walk. Amen.