

Wait for the Lord

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[0 : 00] And it's chapter 1, verse 12, through to chapter 2, verse 3. Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One?

We shall not die. O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof. You who are of purer eyes than to see evil, and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors, and are silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He brings all of them up with a hook. He drags them out with his net.

He gathers them in his dragnet. So he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net, and makes offerings to his dragnet, for by them he lives in luxury, and his food is rich.

Is he then to keep on emptying his net, and mercilessly killing nations forever? I will take my stand at my watchpost, and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint.

[1 : 25] And the Lord answered me, write the vision, make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.

For still 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.

It will not delay. Our second reading is on page 1210 of the Church Bibles. Hebrews chapter 10, and I'm going to read from verses 26 to 39.

That's page 1210, Hebrews chapter 10, starting at verse 26. For if we go on sinning deliberately, after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much more punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the spirit of grace?

[2 : 58] For we know him who said, Vengeance is mine, I will repay. And again, the Lord will judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

But recall the former days, when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated.

For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession, and an abiding one.

Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised.

For, yet a little while, and the coming one will come, and will not delay. But my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.

[4 : 17] But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls. As we stand.

We've just sung, Speak O Lord, and yes, Heavenly Father, we know that you have spoken, and do continue to speak every time your word is opened. And so we know the real question isn't whether you will speak, but whether we will listen.

And we pray this morning that you would help us to listen, to heed what we hear, and to obey. For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Well do take a seat, and turn back with me if you would, to the prophet Habakkuk, in the Old Testament, page 948, in the Church Bibles.

Habakkuk, chapter 1, verse 11, to chapter 2, verse 3. And if you're, somebody finds it helpful to take notes, you'll see there's a space on the back to do so.

[5 : 21] I'm sorry we haven't got an outline, but I think the structure will be pretty clear as we go along. Now, last month marked the 225th anniversary of William Wilberforce moving his first anti-slavery bill before Parliament in 1791.

His proposed legislation was defeated by a landslide, and Wilberforce was subjected to scorn, threats, and widespread contempt.

But he believed passionately in the campaign for abolition, and so he didn't give up. He tried again in 1792, 1793, 1797, 1798, 1799, 1804, and 1805.

But on each occasion, he was defeated 11 times in all. Wilberforce knew slavery was unjust. He knew it was inhuman, barbaric, and wicked.

And yet for two decades, he simply witnessed injustice and evil prospering. He was also a deeply Christian man.

[6 : 36] It's not widely known that he wrote only one book in his life, which was largely an evangelistic tract, persuading his peers to become followers of Jesus Christ. Wilberforce passionately believed in the truths of the Bible, and yet for so much of his life, the God he believed in must have appeared absent, seemingly either impotent or indifferent towards evil.

And that's the kind of experience that Habakkuk wrestles with in this short book that we began to look at last week. You'll remember the context, probably writing at the end of the 7th century BC. Habakkuk lived through some of the darkest days of Israel's history. Both palace and pulpit, kings and clergy, had deserted God's word and God's ways.

Verse 4 of chapter 1 told us that the law was paralyzed, that justice never went forth. God's word and God's ways were widely neglected.

And in the first of two complaints or questions that he fires at God, we saw last week Habakkuk crying out in verse 2, How long, O Lord? How long before you act to rescue your people and punish the guilty?

[7 : 57] It was a searching question, but was met by a surprising answer. Because God assured Habakkuk that he would act, that he did care, and that judgment was around the corner.

But it would be executed in the most unexpected way. For God was about to do a work that he said Habakkuk would not believe, even if told.

And God then went on to describe the coming Babylonian exile, the impending defeat of Israel at the hands of the mighty Chaldeans, the fearsome superpower of the day. Habakkuk would get what he wanted, judgment against rebellious Israel, but it would leave him with more questions than answers.

Because you see, while Israel may have been wicked and her leaders certainly worthy of punishment, Israel was still God's special people, a people he promised to preserve and to prosper. And as wicked as they may have been, their evil was nothing compared to that of the Chaldeans, a people described as bitter and violent, proud and idolatrous.

[9 : 09] As God himself says at the end of verse 11, they were guilty men whose own might is their God. So at the end of last week's passage, we were left with a conundrum, an uncomfortable puzzle.

You see, God was promising to judge Israel's sin by allowing an even more wicked nation to conquer her. Think about the way in which the war in Afghanistan at the turn of this century led to the rise of the Taliban, a regime even more oppressive than their predecessors, or the overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya by militants who included radical Islamists.

Evil being defeated by greater evil. And here it was God's own people facing judgment at the hands of pagan idolaters. It seemed unthinkable.

And just as William Wilberforce must have wondered if God was really in control, if he would ever live to see justice prevail, so in the verses we're looking at this morning, Habakkuk is left grappling with the profound mismatch that he saw between what he knew to be true of God and what he experienced in the world around him.

And his response teaches us how we ought to react when we see exactly that same mismatch in the world today.

[10:36] We're going to unpack what Habakkuk teaches us in this second part of his book by first considering the two seemingly incompatible things that he notes about God, and then by looking at his response in the face of that apparent contradiction.

So first of all, Habakkuk expresses his faith in a sovereign God. A sovereign God. Even amidst what is another emotionally charged accusation concerning God's justice, Habakkuk's words here are packed full of affirmations of God's power and perfection.

Have a look down with me. Verse 12. Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? So Habakkuk recognized that God is constant, everlasting, and unchanging.

That's in fact what that word Lord, or Yahweh, means of course. Not only that, he knew that God's also in control. He controls all things. Halfway through verse 12, Habakkuk accepts what God has told him, but recognizes that the Chaldean invasion would not be a result of their own strength, but God's hand.

O Lord, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof, he says. God pulls the strings of history.

[11:57] He is sovereign, even over evil. So God is constant. He's in control. And in verse 13, He cannot look at wrong. You are of purer eyes than to see evil, and cannot look at wrong.

It wasn't the case that God was unmoved by the evil of the Chaldeans. Constant. In control. He cannot look at wrong.

And he's the creator. Have a look at verse 14 this time. You make mankind like the fish of the sea, Habakkuk asserts. Habakkuk knew that mankind, even the Babylonians, were simply creatures created by God.

So despite circumstances, Habakkuk affirms his belief in a sovereign God. A God who made all things, who rules all things, and who won't let evil go unpunished.

And I think it's very striking that Habakkuk holds onto these truths about God here. You see, facing the very real questions he had, Habakkuk's starting point wasn't his experience, but God's character.

[13:15] He views reality and appeals to God on the basis of what he knew to be true about him. He didn't throw away his faith just because present circumstances seemed confusing.

He rather sought to understand those circumstances in light of what he knew God to be like. And that's a great model for us, isn't it?

God's people have always had to live by faith rather than sight. Trusting in his promises and holding onto his goodness, even when surrounded by great opposition and suffering.

And what will enable us also to persevere in faith during difficult times is clinging to an unshakable certainty about who God is and what he has done.

He is in control. He is good. And he will act. You see, the temptation is always to let circumstances shape how we understand the world.

[14:18] Evil prospers, so we conclude God can't be in control and we give up praying. The leaders of God's people start to deny the truth of his word, as in Habakkuk's day. So we assume we also must move with the times.

Those who commit sin seem to get away with it and enjoy more successful lives even, so we think sin doesn't really matter and that we might as well join in. But Habakkuk didn't let go of what he knew to be true about God just because of circumstances.

Rather, he allowed his response to those circumstances to be informed by who God is. In fact, I love that little expression of faith that we get in verse 12.

I wonder if you spotted it. Habakkuk says, Are you not from everlasting, O Lord my God, my Holy One? We shall not die. We shall not die.

Habakkuk now knew God was sending the Babylonians in judgment, a judgment that would mean exile and even death for some. But Habakkuk could nonetheless be confident that as a nation, Israel wouldn't die because God is constant and is in control.

[15:31] Because he is sovereign, God's promises wouldn't fail ultimately. And we can have the same confidence as Habakkuk. Christianity may be dwindling in this country.

Church attendance may be declining. I don't know, we may even be experiencing something of the same judgment of God against his people's compromise and cowardice that Israel experienced. But because of his promises and because he is sovereign, we can be sure the church will not die, not completely.

God will preserve and protect his people. And notice his sovereign even over the setbacks we experience. Just in passing, it's worth noticing, I think, how God's sovereignty is an active sovereignty here.

Sometimes when wicked things happen, because we so want to distance God from them, we end up downplaying his sovereignty, giving the impression that he's not really in control, that because he, I don't know, values free will perhaps, he takes a step back from the world and simply looks on helplessly at what he permits people to do in his world.

But I don't think such a God offers much comfort in the face of evil. And the God we see here in verse 12 is far more active than that. Sure, God stands behind evil in a different way from how he stands behind good.

[16:56] We'll see later in the book that in the final analysis, evil is never allowed to go unpunished. But notice the word Habakkuk uses here. He says that God ordained the Chaldean invasion as a judgment.

He didn't simply permit it, but ordained it and intended it to work out his purposes. He is sovereign over all things.

I don't know whether you're a James Bond fan, but when you watch a Bond film, there's a fairly standard formula. Bond finds himself in some kind of scrape or hole and it looks like he won't survive.

Circumstances look bleak. He doesn't look like he's going to save the day. And yet as viewers, we know enough of James Bond to know that he will somehow survive adversity and complete his mission in the end.

In the film Skyfall, when Bond reappears safely after everyone else has doubted him, in her final ever words in a Bond film, M says to Bond, well, I did get one thing right, referring to her confidence in him.

[18:03] You see, she never lost her faith in Bond and her trust was vindicated in the end. That's a very trivial illustration, but one day we'll be able to look back and see that our confidence in God is well placed, that however our circumstances may look now, he is both sovereign and good.

And yet it doesn't always look like that now, does it? Which brings us on to the second thing Habakkuk notes here about God, that he appears to be a silent God. A silent God.

God had warned that what he was about to do would be unbelievable. And here we see that Habakkuk did indeed find it very hard to believe. Having affirmed God's holiness and sovereignty in verse 12, he then moves on to his question in verse 13, the second great complaint of his in his book.

Just have a look, verse 13. He says to the Lord, you who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

Notice the why question again. We had it back in verse 3 and it follows the same format here. In verse 3, Habakkuk could complain to God in light of his own people's sin. Why do you idly look at wrong?

[19:31] And God's answers had only strengthened his question. Notice the repeated language in verse 13. Why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

You see, God seemed silent in the face of wickedness to simply be turning a blind eye at the sin of the Chaldeans.

It was as if he was just shrugging his shoulders at evil like a corrupt judge. And it just didn't make sense. Habakkuk knew God couldn't just tolerate evil. He's pure.

He knew God was able to judge evil. He's the everlasting God who made mankind. And yet he seemed to be a silent God. We can feel the logic of Habakkuk's complaint, can't we?

Sure, Israel deserved her fate. But what of Babylon? Why is she allowed to escape scot-free? After all, Israel was more righteous than she. And Habakkuk emphasizes his point by comparing humankind to helpless fish left to the mercy of brutal regimes like that of Babylon.

[20:51] Have a look at verse 14. You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He, that's Babylon, brings all of them up with a hook.

He drags them out with his net. He gathers them in his dragnet so he rejoices and is glad.

Therefore, he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet. For by them he lives in luxury

and his food is rich.

Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever? Do you see Habakkuk's question again?

He observes the arrogance and violence and exploitation and idolatry of Babylon and asks if she will be allowed to mercilessly kill nations forever.

Will there be no justice for her too as there would be for Israel's sin? Can she simply be allowed to offend with impunity? Now, we won't get a full answer to Habakkuk's questions and his complaints until next week.

[21 : 59] But I think it's helpful to recognize here that Habakkuk does wrestle over these things. It's okay to do that. Of course, there's a sinful way of questioning God when we deny his character or arrogantly think that we know better than him or grow bitter towards him.

But there's also a sense in which we should be demanding that God acts and we should be frustrated when we see evil going unpunished because wickedness is wrong.

God has promised to punish wrongdoing and the righteous ought to be vindicated. And yet, the world in which we live is one where God often appears silent at least and justice can seem far away.

Our older two boys are just getting into Steve Batchel's nature programs and his fierce show on ITV this week featured a sand snake. I don't know if you're familiar with sand snakes but like all good predators, they're very hard to spot.

Buried and camouflaged in sand, they appear absent. And a program showed footage of a frog going about its business unaware that all along he's being watched by this sand snake unaware of his coming disaster.

[23 : 16] The frog carries on for a bit and then suddenly the snake pounces and the frog meets its fate. And these verses remind us that God is a little bit like that sand snake perhaps.

As we'll see next week, God is watching and he will pounce upon and punish wrongdoing in the end. But for now, he may sometimes look absent, hidden.

The wicked may feel safe, unaware of what's coming. God may appear silent. That's something Jesus experienced supremely, of course, on the cross.

When God appeared silent as his son willingly suffered God's just anger against human sin. For a time, evil looked like it was prevailing.

So it's worth us chewing over these verses because they give us, I think, a realistic picture of the Christian life. They tell us what we ought to expect life to be like in this world, even a world ruled by a sovereign and good God.

[24 : 27] Sometimes Christians can fall into the trap of triumphalism, of assuming that because God is in charge and we're on the winning side, that we will always prosper in the here and now, that God will always triumph in this world, that if we're true Christians, we'll never be affected by setbacks or sickness or suffering, that we never fear opposition or discouragements.

Christians. But the reality is that we live in a fallen world and passages like this remind us that the normal experience of faithful believers will often be that of Habakkuk, of being in a minority, of witnessing injustice, of seeing evil prosper, of waiting for God to act.

And that brings us on to our final heading, Habakkuk's response to this great mismatch that he sees between God's sovereignty and his apparent silence. He tells us that amidst that mismatch, we are to wait.

We are to wait. Just look down with me at verse 1 of chapter 2 and let's observe Habakkuk's reaction to all he has heard and said. Verse 1.

I will take my stand at my watch post and station myself on the tower and look out to see what he will say to me. And what I will answer concerning my complaint.

[25 : 52] Habakkuk doesn't despair or grow bitter or take matters into his own hands. He rather describes himself as a watchman looking out to see how God will respond, waiting for the Lord to answer his complaint.

And in effect, the Lord tells him to continue to wait. Have a look at verse 2 where Habakkuk receives his answer. Habakkuk is told two things.

First to write down what he hears so people like us can read it. A reminder that we're to read God's word to give us strength while we wait. We need his assurances about the future and his character.

But supremely, Habakkuk's told to wait. To wait for a future day when God will act in judgment against Babylon and against all those who reject him and his people.

Yes, God acknowledges at the end of verse 3 that his answer may seem slow. But he assures Habakkuk that it will surely come eventually.

[27 : 19] His word will not lie. As we'll see next week, one day God will act, justice will be served. Again, that was something Jesus eventually experienced when he was vindicated at his resurrection.

So I wonder if we're willing to wait for God to act. I don't know what words you think best sums up the Christian life in this world.

There are, of course, lots of things that God wants us to do to glorify him, to tell others about him, to enjoy a relationship with him. But I wonder if waiting would feature on our list of words.

because I think it ought to. Remember how Paul reminded the Thessalonians of how they had turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his son from heaven.

Or how he tells Titus that the grace of God brings salvation, teaching us to say no to ungodliness while we wait for our blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and saviour, Jesus Christ.

[28 : 29] Romans 8 23 tells us that we are to wait eagerly for our adoption as sons. And here Habakkuk is told to wait.

Waiting is a big theme of the Bible. The Christian life is a life of waiting. Which of course reminds us that this life isn't our true home.

Waiting is only ever temporary, isn't it? Something we only do when we're not yet where we want to be. We wait in a doctor's waiting room or in a waiting room on a station platform or at a designated place before a meeting.

And as Christians, we're also waiting. Our stay in this world is only temporary. We're waiting for the day when God will take us to our true home and execute perfect justice.

So when we see or suffer wrongdoing, we're to be patient and remember that God will eventually act to vindicate his people. And this is how the New Testament actually applies these verses from the prophet Habakkuk.

[29 : 36] So tell me before we close, if you would, to Hebrews chapter 10, to that second reading that we had earlier, and verses 35 to 37, which quote from the final verse of our passage today, Habakkuk 2 and verse 3.

So page 1210. Verse 1210. Verse 35.

Hebrews 10, 35. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised.

For, and here's the quote, yet a little while, and the coming one will come, and will not delay. And then the quotation continues into the passage that we'll look at next week.

You see, it wasn't just Habakkuk who needed to wait patiently, according to the writer to the Hebrews, because the judgment which did eventually happen against the Chaldeans pointed forward to a judgment that is still to come.

[30 : 45] The wait isn't over. Hebrews has written to Christians who were suffering persecution and seemingly tempted to ditch their newfound Christian faith. And the writer to the Hebrews tells them that just as Habakkuk had to wait, so we too need to wait for God to come and bring justice and rescue his people.

And he assures us that one day the coming one will come and not delay. William Wilberforce failed 11 times to persuade Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

He lived through injustice and hostility and he had to wait years to see righteousness prevail. But in 1807, his bill was finally passed and the slave trade was abolished 16 long years after the legislation had first been put before Parliament.

And yet it wasn't until 1833, 26 years later, that his ultimate dream was fulfilled. when Parliament passed a bill abolishing slavery itself just three days before his death.

Wilberforce campaigned against a great evil but had to wait until the very end of his life to see justice served. We're not very good at waiting in our culture of instant communication and instant gratification.

[32 : 08] We get frustrated if a website takes more than a split second to load or we don't receive a reply to an email within 24 hours. But as Christians, we need to learn to wait, especially when we see evil prosper.

I don't know where we feel opposed unfairly as Christians at the moment. It could be on the macro level of seeing Christianity being increasingly ridiculed in this country. Or it could be on the micro level, something more personal.

Perhaps friends or family actively ostracize us because of our Christian faith or being faithful to our Christian convictions has hindered us professionally or socially. Maybe one or two of us here are or will face real persecution for our Christian convictions.

But let's take heart. God won't be silent forever. He is sovereign. And like Habakkuk, like Wilberforce, we can wait patiently with confidence.

Because as we'll see next week, justice will prevail in the end. Let's pray. Our Father, we know that we live in a world that is often confusing and puzzling.

[33 : 39] A world where sometimes injustice seems to prosper. suffer. And those who are faithful and righteous seem to suffer. And we pray that you would help us, therefore, to do what Habakkuk does here.

Help us to be those who hold on to what we know to be true of you. We thank you that amidst evil, you still reign supreme, that you are the creator who is always in control, whose character is always constant, and who cannot allow wrong to go unpunished forever.

And we pray that as we hold on to those truths, you would help us to be those who wait patiently, who wait for the day when we will be vindicated, and Jesus will be seen to be king.

And we pray for any here who at the moment are tempted to despair because of their own circumstances. Help them and us to lift our eyes beyond what we see, to what your word reveals to us, and to have confidence that what it says is true, and that evil will be punished in the end.

And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.