

Be Amazed: Trust the Surprising God

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[0 : 00] Well, from time to time we are amazed or surprised by different things in life. When my children were younger, they loved to be amazed and surprised by party tricks that I'd try and do for them.

So I thought I'd try and do one for you this morning. I've got a piece of cloth here. Here we are, a bit of cloth. Nothing up my sleeves. And I'm going to try and make this cloth disappear, so we're going to put it in here.

All right, then we put it into this hand here. It's been a while since I've done this. I don't know if it's going to work. All right. All right.

Put it in there. Okay. Ready? All right. Last one. Ready? Here we go. One, two, three. Amazed? No, no, no, clap. It's just a fake thumb.

Yeah, I'll put that away. But they're not the only things that surprise and amaze us in life.

[1 : 03] Often it's answers that people give us to our questions. I was amazed and surprised the other day when I asked my children, can you please clean up your room? And they said, yeah, sure, Dad.

I nearly fell over. That was a positive surprising answer. Sometimes, though, a bit more seriously, there are negative surprising answers.

I spoke with my parents last week, asked them how they were going, and I expected them to say the usual, we're fine, just getting old, but we're fine. But this time my mum said, oh, your father's doctor thinks he has cancer, so he's going in this Tuesday for a biopsy.

Now that answer took the wind out of my sails. It was surprising, but not in a good way. Well, today we start a short three-week series while Andrew is away on the minor prophet called Habakkuk.

And Habakkuk asks God a question, as Guy said, a question that we all can relate to. But he gets an answer which is rather surprising, to him at least, an amazing answer, which is what God calls it.

[2 : 09] Now before I get started, or we get started in Habakkuk, let me give you some brief background, historical background to this prophet and his prophecy. On the back of your outlines is an Old Testament timeline.

It is a little small, but it's the best I could do, I'm sorry. Now if you follow down the line, past King David, to where the line splits in two, you might remember that after King David came King Solomon, whose sin eventually led to Israel being split into two kingdoms.

The Northern Kingdom kept the name Israel, and after Solomon, the Northern Kingdom had 19 different kings. And guess how many of those 19 were bad?

19, you got it, yep. In fact, if you read through the book of two kings in the Bible, you'll read this sentence that is repeated like a broken record. So-and-so became king and did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

And so in 722 BC, the superpower of the world at the time, Assyria, wiped them out completely, which is why the line stops. The Northern Kingdom is no more. The Southern Kingdom was called Judah, after the biggest tribe in the south, Judah.

[3 : 21] After Solomon, it had 20 different kings. Twelve were evil, and eight were good. And one of those good kings was a man called Josiah, who found the book of the law, the Bible.

And that tells you how bad things were in Judah, that they lost their Bible. Anyway, he got it back, and he tried to put Judah back on track. And at the same time, you'll see on the left-hand side of the timeline, I've tried to enlarge what's happening in that period, Babylon is starting to rise in power.

In fact, they've conquered Assyria. And when Josiah died in 609 BC, Babylon was well and truly the superpower at that time.

But when Josiah died, his son Jehoiakim became king. And unfortunately, he went back to the old ways and did evil in the eyes of the Lord. And so it's somewhere between 609 and 598 BC, where Judah is again doing evil under Jehoiakim, and the Babylonians have conquered Assyria and become the superpower of the world, that Habakkuk takes place.

That's the background. We're not told much about the prophet himself, only that he was a prophet. And perhaps this is deliberate, because what's really important is not his personality or where he came from, but his prophecy, which is recorded as God's word.

[4 : 44] And this word of God is only 56 verses long in total. The whole prophecy is 56 verses. And so relative to its size, it actually punches above its weight.

Relative to its size, it's one of the most quoted Old Testament books in the New Testament. And it can be broken up into three parts. So let me very quickly give you an overview of the book. So on the next slide, you've got part one, Habakkuk's first complaint, God's first answer.

Part two, Habakkuk's second complaint, God's second answer. Very simple. And part three, Habakkuk's prayer and resolve. And so today we're looking at Habakkuk's first complaint, which brings us to point one in your outlines and verse two in your Bibles.

So have a look there. Verse two to four. Habakkuk says, How long, Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, violence, but you do not save?

Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrongdoing? destruction and violence are before me. There is strife and conflict abounds.

[5 : 55] Therefore, the law of God is paralyzed and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous so that justice is perverted.

Now, Habakkuk's complaint here is really about two things. First, it's about violence and injustice in Judah. Those words, injustice and violence are repeated.

So the word violence comes up in verse two and verse three. And the idea of injustice comes up in verse three. And again, in verse four, you see under evil King Jehoiakim, there's great violence and injustice in Judah, such that the book of the law, which good King Josiah brought back is now verse four, paralyzed.

Again, things are so bad that God's law has been rendered ineffective. It's gone out the window and people are largely lawless. So much so that the wicked hem in the righteous among them, such that the righteous have nowhere to go.

I read in the news just this week that with the help of the U.S., Iraqi troops are still trying to take back the city of Fallujah in Iraq from ISIS. And so what ISIS fighters have now decided to do, they're actually, the people in the city, the residents in the city that were trapped have been starving.

[7 : 10] But what ISIS have now decided to do is use those residents as human shields against the Iraqi troops. Here's a real life picture of the wicked hemming in, trapping the righteous, the innocent, at least in this war.

And it's evil, isn't it? And so you can understand Habakkuk's complaint, can't you? Sometimes Habakkuk is called the protesting prophet, partly because of the nice alliteration.

And while he is protesting here, it is a reasonable protest, is it not? Especially when they're all supposed to be God's people. And yet here they are turning on each other, self-destructing, imploding.

And at the same time, God seems to be silent and unwilling to save. This is the second part of Habakkuk's complaint. See verse 2 again. How long, Lord, must I call for help?

But you do not listen, you silent. Or cry out to you, violence, but you do not save. Do you see the issue? Seems like Habakkuk has been calling out to God for some time, and yet silence.

[8 : 17] And again, Judah are God's chosen people, and so when is God going to bring justice and save them? How long, O Lord, will you remain silent and unwilling to save? And again, this is something I think we can relate to, can't we?

I mean, we can cry out during our own times of trouble, and God sometimes seems silent. And we feel like saying, how long, O Lord? Or, we can see the injustice happening towards Christians in the Middle East.

Or Northern Africa. And we can cry out for justice, and yet God seems silent and unwilling to save them. Or closer to home, we can see the growing persecution, and frankly, injustice, and bullying of Christians here in Victoria.

by our Premier, who deliberately undermines Christian values, like the removal of SRI, and the introduction of the Safe Schools Program, which is not about safe schools, it's setting an agenda. In fact, I saw an article last month, in the Eternity magazine, where you don't need to take my word for it, they interviewed former Prime Minister John Howard.

On the next slide, this is what John Howard said. He said, the notion that Christian influence and values, should be consigned to the history books, is a nonsense. He's talking about the Safe Schools Program as well. Australians should be aware, that there are some, who would drive Christian religion, from the public space.

[9 : 35] And the next slide, for instance, attempts made by some state governments, and then he says, literally, especially in Victoria, is an offensive, anti-religious streak, in some sections of the government.

And so, how long, O Lord, will you let this go on for? How long will you let such injustice occur to your people? You see, Habakkuk's cry is one we can relate to, isn't it?

And yet, it is still a cry of faith. Notice, Habakkuk has not walked away from God, no, he continues to cry to God. It's still a cry of faith. And what's more, we know that while God may sometimes seem silent, he does always answer our prayers.

It's just that sometimes, the answer is no. Sometimes, it's not yet. And sometimes, even when it is yes, it's a yes, answered in a rather surprising way.

And that's what Habakkuk discovers next. Point two, verse five. Look at the nations, says God, and watch, and be utterly amazed.

[10 : 43] Why? Well, because I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. Now, this is not God's answer yet.

Rather, God is getting them ready for his answer. And I say them ready, because the words here are all plural, literally, use, if you like. So God is talking to all of Judah here.

And he tells them, go and look at the nations, because that's where they'll see the answer to Habakkuk's complaint coming from. And this answer is going to happen in your days, he says. They're going to see this answer actually happen in their lifetime. Now, now this is good, because God says his answer is going to be so surprising, so utterly amazing, that they would never have believed it otherwise.

In fact, the words utterly amazing there in verse five are literally, be amazed, be amazed. It's repeated in the Hebrew, just so they don't miss the point. It's as though God is saying, okay, everyone, you'd better be sitting down for this.

[11 : 45] So what is this surprising answer to Judah's injustice? Well, it's verse six. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwellings, not their own.

In other words, God is going to use the Babylonians to wipe out Judah's injustice and save his people. Now, if the people in Judah were sitting down for this answer, they would have jumped up in outrage.

And if they were standing up for the answer, they would have fainted in disbelief. I mean, this is not what they were expecting. I'm guessing Habakkuk expected God to say something like, I'll raise up another godly king like Josiah, whom you've just had, to bring justice and save his people.

Or maybe a godly judge. He's done that before, as you've been hearing in recent weeks. But to raise up the Babylonians, to bring justice to Judah?

It's startling news. I mean, Habakkuk cried out about the injustice and violence in Judah, and God's solution is to bring more violence and injustice to Judah. Now, I realize you still might not feel the weight of this, how utterly amazing this answer is.

[12 : 57] So let me try and put it in today's language. It would be like praying that there would be justice for Christians in Victoria, and God's answers being, sure, I'm raising up ISIS to come and take over Victoria, and then I'll remove the premier or whatever.

Imagine that. It would be a shocking answer, wouldn't it? That's what this answer was like for Habakkuk. For the Babylonians are like terrorists. They are evil. I mean, just look at how God himself describes them.

Verse 6, they are ruthless and impetuous. Verse 7, they are feared and dreaded people. They are a law to themselves. They don't bring justice. They do their own law, and they promote their own honor.

Their horses, verse 8, are swifter than leopards, fiercer than wolves at dusk. Their cavalry gallops headlong. Their horsemen come from afar. They fly like an eagle, swooping to devour. They all come intent on violence. Their hordes advance like a desert wind, and gather prisoners like sand. They mock kings and scoff at rulers. They laugh at fortified cities, because they build earth ramps up to the walls.

[14:03] And that's what the Babylonians did, by the way, in history. Big wall of a city, or just build a big ramp, and then march the troops over. So they just laugh at walls and fortified cities. And they sweep past like wind and go on.

They are guilty people, whose own strength is their God. Do you see how evil they are? This is really what is so surprising to Habakkuk.

I mean, Habakkuk knew God's promises in the past, that if Israel or Judah sinned, God would bring in a foreign nation to judge them. He knew that. So on the slide from Deuteronomy chapter 28, God said, look, if you don't obey, this is what's going to happen.

The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the ends of the earth. Notice, like an eagle swooping down, which is exactly how Babylon is described in verse 8, they will lay siege to all the cities throughout your land, until the high fortified walls, in which you trust, fall down.

Habakkuk knew that this was a real chance of happening because of Israel's sin. Habakkuk also knew that God had given Judah lots of warnings, in fact, hundreds of years worth of warnings, but they had not listened.

[15:15] So on the next slide from 2 Chronicles 36, we read this, Habakkuk knew that as well.

He knew that God had given them plenty of chances, but the thing that so utterly amazed Habakkuk is that God would use such an utterly evil people to do all this, to bring justice and to say, that was the shock.

And we know this is what shocked Habakkuk because we see it in next week's passage. He doesn't complain about judgment on Judah, he complains about whom God is using to bring it. Let me give you a sneak peek.

Have a look at verse 12 and 13. Habakkuk responds by saying, Lord, are you not from everlasting? My God, the Holy One, you'll never die, but you, Lord, have appointed them to execute judgment. You, my rock, have ordained them to punish. Your eyes are too pure to look on such evil. You cannot tolerate wrongdoing. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent?

[16:38] While these wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves. Do you see his problem? Babylon is so evil that, that Judah, in its current state of violence and injustice, in fact, every other nation is more righteous than Babylon.

Such is their evil. So how can God, who is so holy and pure, even consider using them? You see, the utter surprise is that God is going to use such utter evil to answer Habakkuk's prayer and to bring justice and salvation for his people.

That's the surprise. But that's what God did. At the end of 598 BC, the Babylonians conquered Judah, but left many of them in place, including a puppet king, Zedekiah, who ruled from 597 BC. And yet Judah continued to do what was evil in the eyes of the Lord. And so for another 11 years of warnings, they still did not repent. And so the Babylonians came back and completely destroyed the land in 586 BC.

Judah's wicked were punished. There was justice. But God also saved his people from complete destruction. Because unlike the northern kingdom, in the south, there was a remnant, a group that was saved and carried off to Babylon for about 70 years, where they actually did okay.

[17:59] And then God saved them out of Babylon and brought them back to the land of Judah and at the right time sent his son Jesus to save them completely. But as I said, the utter surprise was that God would raise up and use such utter evil to accomplish his purposes.

And God knew it would be a surprise for Habakkuk. That's why he told Habakkuk, get ready for this. It's going to be utterly amazing. Sit down for it. And it's still a surprise for Christians today.

And for some of us, we may not like the idea that God not only allows evil, but actively raises it up and uses it for his purpose. But at this point, we need to remember three things, which brings us to point three.

First, it actually shows that God is completely in control and sovereign over all things, even evil. If he can direct and use evil as he pleases, then it shows us that he's completely in control of it.

And that's a good thing, isn't it? I don't know about you, but I'd rather a God who was in complete control of everything, including evil, than a God who wasn't completely in control. I mean, if God wasn't completely in control, then he wouldn't be God over everything, would he?

[19 : 09] And if he's not God over everything, then how can we be sure he's able to help us in everything? We can't be. And Habakkuk 1 teaches us that God is in complete control, utterly sovereign, to the point where he not only allows evil, but will direct it and use it.

But second thing to remember is that while God directs and uses evil, he's not responsible for evil. You see, people are the ones who actually do the evil.

And so people are the ones who are to be held responsible, culpable for evil. They're the ones who are to be judged for it. In Habakkuk 1 verse 11, God says that Babylonians are the guilty ones.

They're the ones who do the evil, not him. And so God will use those who are evil and sovereignly work through them to accomplish his good purposes. Just like we'll see in Habakkuk.

To bring justice and salvation for his people. And that's the third thing we are to remember. God directs and uses evil for good. And not only do we see this in Habakkuk, the bringing of justice to Judah, but we especially see it at the cross, don't we?

[20 : 21] Where God directs and uses evil to accomplish the greatest good ever. The justice of sin and the salvation of people. So on the next slide, in Acts chapter 2, we read, this man Jesus was handed over to you.

How? Well, by God's definite plan and foreknowledge. And you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. Or in Acts chapter 4, here's some wicked people.

Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your hand and will had decided beforehand should happen.

You see, here is God deciding to raise up and use certain wicked people like Herod, Pilate, Gentiles, and certain Jews to see his son crucified so that Jesus might pay for our sin.

And by paying for our sin, by taking the punishment for our sin, Jesus brings both justice, he pays for our sin, and salvation, he saves us from it.

[21 : 30] You see, at the cross, God uses evil to accomplish good, justice for sin, and salvation for people. And what's more, this is utterly amazing too.

I mean, the Jews would never have believed that God would send his only son as the Messiah to be crucified on a cross and rise again in order to bring justice for sin and salvation for people.

They would never have believed that. In fact, many Jews still don't believe that. It's too shocking. It's utterly amazing, too surprising. But we must believe it if we want to receive this salvation, this forgiveness of sins.

And this is what we see in our second reading from Acts 13. So, please turn in your Bibles to Acts 13 and to the second reading. Page 1106.

Page 1106. Acts 13. And we'll pick it up at verse 38, at the top of the right-hand column there.

[22 : 34] Verse 38. So, Paul is speaking and he says, Therefore, my friends, I want you to know that through Jesus, the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you.

Through Jesus, everyone who believes is set free from every sin. A justification. There's justice for sin. We are put right, justified, that you are not able to have under the law of Moses.

Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you. And here he quotes Habakkuk 1. Look, you scoffers, be utterly amazed, literally, and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe even if someone told you.

See the quote here from Habakkuk? It's a little different, but Paul is saying that just as God's answer to Habakkuk's prayer for justice and salvation was surprising, well so too is God's answer to our need of justice and salvation from sin.

As I said, the Jews would never have guessed this would be God's answer to their problem of justification, being right with him. They would never have believed it if they were not told.

[23 : 50] And sadly, many still not believe it even though they are told. Which is why Paul also uses the quote as a warning. He says, be careful then, verse 40, that what happened to Judah in Habakkuk's day, their judgment for sin, does not happen to you because it will if you won't believe in Jesus.

And so the first question for us this morning is do we believe in Jesus? Do we believe this message that is utterly amazing? I mean, it's utterly amazing in the sense that it is sometimes hard to believe

that Jesus is both man and God and that he not only died but rose again?

It's utterly amazing in that sense but it's also utterly amazing in the sense that God would actually give up his only son to take the punishment for our sin so that we can be saved from it.

So do you believe in Jesus? That's the first question. For us who do then, Habakkuk 1 is actually a very reassuring passage for it reminds us that while God is not responsible or culpable for evil, he is in control of it and what's more, he will use it and works through it for good in ways that might surprise us.

And so on the last slide then, Romans 8, a well-known verse, and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose.

[25 : 21] See, God works in all things even through evil for our good. To be clear, our ultimate good as the next verse will show us, I don't have it there but in verse 29 is to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus, to be made like Jesus.

But the point is God works in all things even through evil in surprising ways for our good. And so we have every reason to keep trusting him even when life doesn't seem to make sense like it didn't for Habakkuk.

We have every reason to keep trusting him when we face injustice ourselves. It's why I'm not stressed or anxious about what's happening to us Christians here in Victoria.

Don't mishear me, I am angry and sad and concerned and I will continue to pray as we all should and take whatever legal action I can, sign petitions and so on.

But I'm not overly stressed or anxious because I know God is sovereign in control and he works in all things even through evil for our good. Or take my father who is going for his biopsy this coming Tuesday.

[26 : 28] The doctors say he has a 50-50 chance of having cancer or not and yet he is not overly anxious. Don't get me wrong, he is nervous, he is nervous, but he's actually more relaxed than stressed because he knows his God works in all things even through possible cancer for his good and for the good of all those who love him.

And so I don't know what you're facing in life at the moment but do remember that while it might not make sense to us, we have every reason to keep trusting in our sometimes surprising but always sovereign and good God.

So will you do that? Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for the prophet of Habakkuk.

We thank you for the way that he addresses real questions and we thank you that we've only seen one answer today and we'll see more next week. But we thank you for this answer that although you work in surprising ways, that you are sovereign and work through all things, even evil, to accomplish good.

And so, Heavenly Father, we pray that you would help us to keep trusting in you, our sometimes surprising but always sovereign and good God. we ask it in Jesus' name.

[27 : 50] Amen.