

From Fear to Faith: Finding God in the Ruins

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Date: 05 January 2020

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[0 : 00] We want to focus our thoughts tonight on Habakkuk chapter 3 verses 17 to 19. Habakkuk chapter 3 verses 17 to 19.

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit should be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and 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. God, the Lord, is my strength. He makes my feet like the deer's.

He makes me tread on high places. To the choir master with stringed instruments. Now I'm sure you're familiar with the name Helen Rosevear.

She was a very famous missionary who died a few years ago. After Helen Rosevear graduated from Cambridge in medicine, she studied at the WEC College in London, where she went to Belgium to study French, and eventually went on to Holland to take a course in tropical medicine.

[1 : 23] and she prepared to be a missionary in the Congo, which is now called Zaire. And in mid-March of 1953, Helen Rosevear turned up in the Congo at the age of 28.

In the first two years, she founded a training school for nurses, training women to serve as nurse evangelists, who in turn would run clinics and dispensaries in different regions. In October 1955, she asked to be transferred seven miles away into a remote region, where she could set up a hospital.

She served mothers and lepers and children, along with a training school for paramedics and 48 rural clinics. It was the only medical facility in 150 miles.

And then, in 1960, the Congo got its independence from Belgium, and it was plunged into a civil war.

And in 1964, Helen Rosevear was taken captive in her own home. She was among ten Protestant missionaries who were put under house arrest.

[2 : 39] And she decided to try and escape. But she was captured by the soldiers. This is what she says.

They found me and dragged me to my feet. They struck me over head and shoulders, flung me on the ground, kicked me, dragged me to my feet, only to strike me again. The sickening, searing pain of a broken tooth, a mouth full of sticky blood.

My glass is gone, beyond sense, numb with horror, and unknown fear, driven, dragged, pushed back to my own house, yelled at, insulted, and cursed.

She wrote later on, her captors were brutal and drunken. They cursed and swore, they struck and kicked, they used the butt end of rifles and rubber truncheons. We were roughly taken, thrown in prisons, humiliated, and threatened.

And those captors, for those five months in 1964, showed no restraint on Helen Rosevear, in any way.

[3 : 47] But she says, later on, as she recounted that experience, she said, on that dreadful night, beaten and bruised, terrified and tormented, and utterly alone, I had felt, at last, God had failed me.

Surely he could have stepped in earlier. Surely things did not have gone that far. I had reached what seemed to be the ultimate depth, of despairing nothingness.

In this darkness, however, she sensed the Lord saying to her, you asked me, when you were first converted, for the privilege of being a missionary. This is it. Don't you want it?

These are not your sufferings. They are mine. She eventually received an overwhelming sense of privilege, that Almighty God, would stoop to ask of me, a mere nobody in a forest, clearing in the jungles of Africa, something he needed.

She later pointed to God's goodness, despite this great evil. Through the brutal, heartbreaking experience of torture, God met with me, with outstretched arms of love.

[4 : 58] It was an unbelievable experience. He was so utterly there, so totally understanding. His comfort was so complete. And suddenly I knew, I really knew that his love, was unutterably sufficient.

He did love me. He did understand. Now tonight, maybe we haven't had a Helen Rosevear type experience.

But for many of us, over these last few months and years, we have had our own traumatic experiences. All of us at some time have asked what Habakkuk asked in chapter 1.

Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear. We've all asked that little word in verse 3 of chapter 1, why?

Why? Mags Duncan has written a book on Habakkuk, after her experience of losing her niece to cancer.

[6 : 10] She says this, this record of Habakkuk's journey opens a window for us into one man's struggle to make sense of his world, and God's involvement in it.

When that world was falling apart, we become observers of the birth of hope, through the labour pains of brokenness and distress. And we want to go on that journey with Habakkuk tonight.

That journey that took Habakkuk from worry to worship, and from fear to faith, from perplexity to praise, from anguish to awe, and from despair to dancing across the top of mountains.

Habakkuk ministered around 607 and 608 BC, a few years before Babylon destroys Jerusalem, and takes the cream of their young people away into exile.

We read about that in Daniel, don't we? That was all about 20 years down the road. We saw this morning with Micah that the great superpower was the Assyrians or the Chaldeans.

[7 : 26] Sorry, the Assyrians. But the superpower now were the Babylonians or the Chaldeans, who were now on the rise. And Habakkuk is on the threshold of great turmoil and darkness.

Again, like this morning, Judah is filled with idolatry and moral chaos. violence and corruption. And Habakkuk sees by faith that all that he knows and loves will be destroyed in a few short years.

He is God's prophet at a time of national disaster. And Habakkuk is asking some serious questions. Why are these things happening?

Why are they happening now? Why doesn't God intervene? Why don't you do something, Lord? Why don't you stop these wicked Babylonians?

Why do you use godless people to carry out your work? Why don't you demonstrate your power? Why are you taking so long?

[8 : 38] Why don't you act now? And in chapter 1 of Habakkuk, God appears to be silent. As we see, as we read on in the book, the problem is not the silence of God, but the fact that the people are not listening.

Chapter 1, verse 5 says, Look among the nations and see, wonder and be astounded, for I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told. We think because God doesn't always answer the prayers in the way that we want, that God is somehow not working.

But God was working, but the people were not listening. God was speaking in judgment against a wicked and rebellious nation.

We see in chapter 1 that God is the God of providence. We sometimes use that phrase, that the devil is in the details.

But what we see in chapter 1 of Habakkuk is that God is in the details. God is in the details of every aspect of life and every aspect of history.

[9 : 53] God rules over all the centuries of history. He rules over all the empires as they rise and fall. And at the end of chapter 1, the start of chapter 2, Habakkuk says, 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.

Habakkuk looks patiently towards the Lord for an answer. And in chapter 2, we see this great verse that is quoted in the New Testament so many times in verse 4, Behold, his soul is puffed up, it is not upright within him, but the righteous shall live by faith.

which is quoted in the New Testament three times in Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. And chapter 2 of Habakkuk is a chapter about faith in dark times.

It's about trusting God in the dark times. And then in chapter 3, the one we want to look at tonight, we see the covenant faithfulness of God as we saw this morning.

This is a psalm of praise to God. But it is also a lament. It is a psalm of Habakkuk pouring his heart out to the Lord and how in the Lord he finds sovereignty, salvation, strength and security.

[11 : 41] So how does Habakkuk find, how does Habakkuk go from worry to worship as Warren Wiersby calls his book on Habakkuk?

How does he go from fear to faith as Lloyd-Jones calls his commentary on Habakkuk? Well, we see that Habakkuk is not only just on a national journey, he's on a personal journey.

Habakkuk himself is on a personal journey of faith as he prophesies in this book.

We want to notice four things tonight about Habakkuk's journey. First of all, we want to see God's sovereignty in the ruins. God's sovereignty in the ruins.

It starts our way back in chapter 1 of verse 12. Habakkuk says, Are you not from everlasting, O Lord, my God, my Holy One?

[12 : 43] We shall not die. It's almost like Habakkuk has an epiphany of God. The first 11 verses of Habakkuk are all about his complaint.

How long shall I cry for help and you will not hear? Why do you make me see iniquity and why do you idly look at wrong? Then there's a switch in verse 12.

He begins to look at the sovereignty of God. He says that God is from everlasting. He says that God is holy. He says that God is a rock.

Chapter 2, verse 20, he says that God is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him. God is above the affairs of men.

God is watching everything. Nothing misses his gaze. Chapter 3, verse 3, he says, God came from Timon and the Holy One from Mount Paran.

[13 : 49] His splendor covered the heavens and the earth was full of his praise. A reference, of course, to the giving of the law at Mount Sinai where God revealed his glory and his power.

And then in verse 6 of chapter 3, he talks about God as the creator. He stood and measured the earth. He looked and shook the nations. Then the eternal mountains were scattered.

The everlasting hills sank low. His were the everlasting ways. A bit like Micah this morning as Habakkuk begins to think on the attributes of God.

As he thinks on his sovereignty, on his holiness, on his stability. He is encouraged. As he looks to the heavens, he begins to see the Great One, the Holy One, the One who is in control.

And of course, God's sovereignty climaxes, doesn't it, in Jesus. Jesus said, as he was commissioning his disciples, that all authority is given to me in heaven and on earth.

[15 : 01] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. God sovereignly ruled over the events of history to bring a saviour into this world that would one day save us from our sins.

What gives Habakkuk peace in the storm? Well, it's the great God of glory. He says in chapter 3, verse 2, I have heard the report of you and your work, O Lord, do I fear.

What's he referring to there? He's referring, of course, to what he's read of God in the works through Moses and Joshua. God redeeming the children of Israel in the land of Egypt.

He's heard of these things, but now he knows them in his heart. We're going to look on later on about the personal pronouns that Habakkuk uses as he encourages himself in the Lord.

I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength. He goes from complaint to worship as he sees the glory and sovereignty of God and he is able to apply it to himself.

[16 : 19] well, how do we apply this to our lives? Well, surely there's a great comfort for us that God is still on the throne.

God hasn't taken a holiday and whatever your personal storm is tonight, God knows about it. The great God of heaven is involved in the storms of our life in ways that we can't really understand.

Maybe tonight you're struggling with grief. Maybe you're coming to terms with illness. Maybe you have a prodigal child. Maybe you have a burden that nobody knows about in the church.

Maybe you've seen a loved one unraveling before your eyes in depression and mental illness. Maybe in the past year you've seen more consultant rooms than you ever imagined you would see in a lifetime.

Maybe tonight you're sad and you're broken and you're heavy. Maybe tonight you're relieved that Christmas is over.

[17 : 34] All that fake happiness that you have to endure. Doesn't Habakkuk show us that there is a place in life for lament?

God is not frightened of our tears. God isn't frightened of your questions. God isn't frightened of our bewilderment.

As Mags Duncan says in her book on Habakkuk, the practice of lament has been described as the most profound demonstration of trust in a loving God because it demonstrates an unwillingness to let go of God no matter how awful the situation.

Lament hooks into God with hope and desperation and trust and hangs on. This form of worship, this offering up of our pain honors God because it brings all that we are in this muddled mess of our lives and places it as an offering before God.

So Habakkuk found rest in the sovereignty of God but then secondly Habakkuk found redemption in the ruins. Habakkuk not only looks to God's sovereignty and his great dealings with his people in the past but Habakkuk sees God as the God of salvation.

[18 : 57] Look at verse 8 in chapter 3 with your wrath against the rivers O Lord with your anger against the rivers of your indignation against the sea when you rode on your horses on the chariot of your salvation.

And also verse 13 when you went out for the salvation of your people for the salvation of your anointed you crushed the head of the house of the wicked laying him bare from thigh to neck.

Again so much of the language is the language of the first five books of the Old Testament. It's the language of redemption and rescue. God riding out to save his people from oppression and slavery.

Habakkuk is seeing the God as the God of salvation. And of course what does verse 13 remind us of? It reminds us of Genesis 3 verse 15 that the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent.

And is this not what our history of our world is all about? The great battle between good and evil. Evil is not some nebulous force as portrayed in The Force Awakens or The Mandalorian.

[20 : 18] Evil is real. Evil is horrible. Evil is destructive. And the problem is that evil is not out there. Evil is in each one of us.

But Jesus came to save. There had been many warrior kings before. There had been David. But he couldn't save us.

Only Jesus could save us. What was Jesus doing as he was being born in a stable? As he was preaching the good news? As he was healing the sick?

As he was riding into Jerusalem on a donkey? As he was being crucified? What was he doing? He was crushing the head of the serpent. He was waging war on sin and evil and death.

That's why there's so much imagery in Revelation about Babylon being fallen in Revelation 18. Babylon represents the kingdom of darkness.

[21 : 22] But the lamb amidst the throne is victorious. And a day is coming when evil will be no more. When the prophecy of chapter 2 verse 14 will ultimately be fulfilled.

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Jesus shall reign where'er the sun.

Does his successive journeys run? His kingdom stretch from shore to shore till moon shall rise and set no more. Habakkuk takes comfort in the God of salvation.

What do we find Habakkuk doing in the midst of chaos and imminent judgment? He is rejoicing in the God of salvation in verse 18.

So God rests in the sovereignty of God. He rejoices in the salvation of God. But then thirdly Habakkuk also finds God's strength in the ruins.

[22 : 30] You see that in verse 19. God the Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the deer's. He makes me tread on high places. Habakkuk has been prophesying about coming judgment.

He's been prophesying about how they will be overrun by a foreign nation. All the best people, all the cream of the young people will be taken a thousand miles away.

Daniel, Shadrash, Meshach and Abednego, they will all be taken away and put into service in Babylon. But yet Habakkuk doesn't see God as weak.

He sees him as strong. We see this in verses 9 to 11. You stripped the sheath from your bow, calling for many arrows. You split the earth with rivers.

The mountains saw you and writhed. The raging waters swept on. The deep gave forth its voice. It lifted its hands on high. The sun and moon stood still in their place at the light of your arrows as they sped, at the flash of your glittering spear.

[23 : 45] God is not some weak, insipid God. He is the warrior God going into battle for his people. And as we heard so well last week, sometimes it takes a trial for us to trust in God's strength.

It took the Babylonian conqueror of Judah for the people to once again trust in the Lord's strength.

strength. And sometimes it's when we are taken to an end of our own resources. When we are faced with things that are too hard for us, it's when we rely in the strength of the Lord.

Wasn't that true? Wasn't it true for Paul in 2 Corinthians 12 when he said that he prayed three times for the thorn in his flesh to go away, whatever that was? What did the Lord say?

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness. God was showing Paul the need of his strength in times of trouble.

[24 : 56] Paul wanted his thorn in the flesh to go away, but that was not the Lord's will. But he assured him that his grace was sufficient for him.

God sometimes brings us to places where we feel completely broken. We're like a shattered vase. If any of you experience grief, you'll know what that feels like.

A place of profound loneliness. Sometimes people ask you how you feel after you've lost a loved one.

But the pain is so deep that you can't even articulate the words to explain how you feel. Maybe you have a burden like that tonight. So painful, so deep, so traumatic, you can hardly share it with anyone else.

You dread somebody asking you in case you have to try and burden yourself. You fear that others aren't strong enough to bear your burden and share your trials.

[26 : 10] Well, we can say from Habakkuk tonight that God is strong enough to bear your trials. If you're flagging and failing tonight, make the Lord your strength.

Habakkuk says, he makes my feet like the deers and he makes me tread on high places.

What does that remind us of? Reminds us, of course, of the last few verses of Isaiah 40. God imparts strength to us when we are sometimes at our weakest.

This imagery of deers running on high places and perhaps referring to the mountainous regions of Judah. God says, my strength is sufficient and we have to take God at his word.

And then lastly, we have security in the ruins. Habakkuk says, where the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit beyond the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food.

[27 : 24] The flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. We are a society that has really lost touch with our agricultural roots.

Many young people particularly have no concept really of where food comes from but Judah of course was still an agrarian society. And if the fig tree didn't blossom and if there was no fruit on the vines and if there was no olives and if the flocks failed, of course there would be utter disaster.

The country would have no future. And Habakkuk is saying, what if the worst happens?

What if the worst case scenario, what if my greatest fears come to pass? What will our security be? And maybe you're asking that question tonight, what if God doesn't intervene in my situation?

What if God doesn't heal? What if God doesn't answer my prayer soon? Well, remember Daniel chapter three.

[28 : 44] remember the three friends in the fiery furnace? King Nebuchadnezzar was filled with fury and rage and ordered the oven to be heated seven times hotter.

What did Nebuchadnezzar say? Is it true, O Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the golden image that I have set up? Now if you are ready, when you hear the sound of the horn, the pipe, the lyre, the trigon, harp and bagpipe and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made well and good.

But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning, fiery furnace. And who is the God who will deliver you out of my hands? Would Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego reply, O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.

If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning, fiery furnace and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

Some of you will remember that as the British forces were being surrounded at Dunkirk in 1940, the forces thought that the Nazis couldn't get through the Ardennes forest, but they did.

[30 : 32] They broke through, the Panzer division broke through and the British forces were surrounded at Dunkirk. And that large tank force began to gradually cut off the British forces.

The German planes were bombing and strafing the soldiers. But the British commander was able to get a communique back to Britain that consisted of just three words.

But if not. That quote from Daniel. These three words sparked a surge of courage, determination and downright grit throughout the British military and the entire civilian population.

Those three words brought about the bravest, most unorthodox, successful rescue of any army in the pages of history. And amazingly God intervened didn't he?

For some reason Hitler told his forces to stop. And instead of having one day to evacuate the troops, the British Navy had nine days.

[31 : 47] And amazingly 338,000 British and French troops were brought back to Dover. But if not, and that is the spirit of Habakkuk.

Even if the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit beyond the vines, even if everything fails, I will rejoice in the Lord.

I will trust in his sovereignty, I will trust in his salvation, I will trust in his strength, and I will trust in his security. That is what Habakkuk is saying in this passage.

And notice, as we said already, the personal pronouns of Habakkuk. Martin Luther said that Christianity was a religion of personal pronouns.

Look how often he says, I and my God, the Lord, is my strength. He makes my feet like the deer's. He makes me tread on high places.

[32 : 57] This is no abstract trial for Habakkuk. You know, the prosperity preachers today, they try and make out that somehow trials are all in our head, and we just need to think positively.

these afflictions, these trials, they were real for Habakkuk. Habakkuk is genuinely bewildered, he is genuinely perplexed, he is genuinely frightened.

But yet, we see in this small prophecy, that he goes from worry to worship, and from fear to faith, as he considers the sovereignty, the security, the strength, and the saving purposes of God.

I wonder if you can do what Habakkuk did tonight. you say, I can't do it, I need help.

Well, maybe you need to pray the same prayer as Habakkuk in chapter 3, verse 2. In the midst of the years, revive it. In the midst of the years, make it known.

[34 : 19] In wrath, remember mercy. Habakkuk was in a dark, difficult, confusing place. things were bad, and things were going to get a lot worse for Habakkuk.

But he prays for personal and for national revival. He prays for God to revive the truth that he knew, but that he was not practicing at that point.

It's the same spirit that Paul says in Philippians 4, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself.

Paul rejoiced in the Lord in the midst of difficult circumstances, just as Habakkuk did. He knew that deep joy that the world knows nothing about.

The world looks at us and perhaps the world comes to a Christian funeral and they see joy, they see rejoicing, they see a deep lasting heaven sent spirit infused joy in Christians.

[35 : 40] Maybe some of you have read John Piper's book Don't Waste Your Cancer, the book that he wrote I think in 2006 on the eve of his surgery for prostate cancer.

This is what he said, I write this on the eve of prostate surgery. I believe in God's power to heal by miracle and by medicine. I believe it is right and good to pray for both kinds of healing.

Cancer is not wasted when it is healed by God, he gets the glory and that is why cancer exists. So not to pray for healing may waste your cancer. But healing is not God's plan for everyone.

And there are many other ways to waste your cancer. I am praying for myself and for you that we will not waste this pain. I wonder if God could be saying to some of us tonight, don't waste your trial.

We wish with all our hearts that our trials would go away. We wish that God would hear our prayers. We wish that God would heal our loved ones.

[36 : 52] But like Habakkuk, look to the Lord, look to his sovereignty, look to his strength, look to his saving purposes, and look to his security.

Trust in the promises of God. I will never leave you nor forsake you. And remember that in the midst of the fiery furnace, Jesus is right there with you.

How many times have been reading scripture that as people wandered through the wilderness, God met with them, God spoke to them. Think of Hagar, think of the children of Israel.

God was dealing with them in the wilderness. But whatever is ahead of us in this coming year, in this coming decade, let's remember Habakkuk's journey from worry to worship, from fear to faith, from perplexity to praise, from anguish to awe, and from despair to dancing across the top of the mountains.

Let's remember that the Lord is with us at all times. Let's rest in these promises. Let's rest in God's sovereign love and care over our lives.

[38 : 11] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for these passages of lament. We confess, O Lord, that so often the experience of our life is one of lament.

We thank you, O God, for the depth of experience of a prophet like Habakkuk. We thank you, Lord, that he was able to say that even if everything fails, yet he would rejoice in your salvation and in your strength.

We thank you tonight, Lord, that we can rest in your sovereignty and we thank you, O Lord, that we are safe and secure in the everlasting arms.

We pray for those, O Lord, tonight who are going through trials. We pray for those who are fearful of these next few days and months. We ask, O Lord, that you would be very near to them and that, Lord, you would comfort them with your precious promises.

Bless your word to us, Lord, we pray. For all we ask is in Jesus' name. Amen. Let's conclude with the last few verses of Psalm 90 in the traditional version.

[39 : 24] Psalm 90 on page 350. Psalm 90 on page 350.

Turn yet again to us, O Lord, how long thus shall it be. Let it repent thee now for those that servants are to thee. Well, with thy tender mercies, Lord, us early satisfy.

So we rejoice shall all our days and still be glad in thee. Psalm 90 verses 13 to the end to the Lord's praise. Amen. our Lord, that strength has art to me.

O with thy tender message, Lord, how early it past is high.

So we rejoice shall all our days and still be glad in thee.

[41 : 03] For it has others have been when we will come high.

And yet wherein we ill have seen, so do thou make us glad.

O let thy heart and heart appear, thy servant's face be full.

And show us to the children near thy glory evermore.

And let the beauty of the Lord, our God, be us upon.

[42 : 28] Our God, be us upon. God, establish them each one.

Lord, bless your word to us. Go with us into a new week, we pray. And may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us both now and forevermore.

Amen. Just to say that there are some copies of the book that I referred to throughout the sermon.

There are some copies through there. If you feel it would be a help to anyone to give this book, there's free copies in the hall. And there's also free copies of the Valley of Vision, which is a book of prayers by Puritans, which is fantastic for your personal devotions.

And there's free copies in the hall. Please take them. Thank you. Thank you.

[44 : 08] Thank you.

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[46 : 24] Thank you.

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