

HABAKKUK Rejoicing in the Tough Times

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[0 : 0 0] When I was a bit younger as a Christian, I had a mentor who was an older Christian man. And when I've talked about this man in the past, I've often described him as the man most like Jesus that I've ever met.

It's a bit of hyperbole, but he was very godly. And I remember one particular strength that this man had was scripture memorization. He was just constantly learning verses and had been doing it the whole time through his Christian life.

He had some that he'd learned as a young boy in the King James Bible that he still knew in the King James text. As he'd gotten older, he'd started learning others in the New International Version, which is the one that was just read out for us.

And in his house, he literally had boxes and boxes of just little memory verse cards just lined up across his room. And whenever you caught up with him, he had a wad of cards, maybe 10 or 15 in his wallet.

There'd be four or five new verses that he was memorizing, and then maybe 10 that he'd learned in his life that he was just kind of refreshing and making sure that he didn't forget them.

[1 : 0 5] And as I spent time with him, I longed for the kind of ready-to-mind Bible knowledge that he had. Just any situation, he could call four or five verses straight to the front of his mind and respond helpfully.

But at the same time, even as I longed for that, as I looked at his discipline, I was almost more overwhelmed by how far down the track he was compared to me.

I'd learned a few Bible verses in youth group and in kids' church, but his example was so challenging, so extreme, that it was more intimidating than it was encouraging.

It didn't make me want to go and learn verses. It made me give up because I would never be that good. This is week number four in the book of Habakkuk. You have been traveling a book full of challenge and encouragement as we seek to follow Jesus in a world that is hostile to following Jesus.

And it could be that this finish, what was just read for us, falls into that same category, where it's more intimidating than it is helpful.

[2 : 1 6] There's a verse in there that might be familiar. I heard at least one person reciting what was clearly a memory verse for them. But as you read that chapter, as you listen to it read out, is it more intimidating than it is encouraging?

My paraphrase, though nothing's going right, I will rejoice. It's kind of like that person who you know their life is falling apart, and yet they're telling you how thankful they are to God for his goodness.

And there's a small part of you that hears them talking and just doesn't believe they're being totally genuine. It's like they know the answer is, God's great and I should thank him, but you're not convinced that's actually how they feel.

That's not what's actually going on inside of them. I mean, we all know we're supposed to rejoice. We all know that's the right answer. I should rejoice. I will rejoice all the time.

But like so many things when it comes to following Jesus, it's simple, but it's really difficult. We know what we should do, but actually doing it is a whole other challenge.

- [3 : 23] So is there any encouragement in this chapter as we finish Habakkuk? Or do we just file this away as a really impressive example of what you should look like as a Christian, but something that's completely unattainable?

I'll rejoice sometimes and as much as I can, but not all the time, not in every situation. Let's dig in. Now, it's worth remembering where we've come from.

Joy wasn't where Habakkuk started, the book. Do you remember four weeks ago when, I don't know who it was, but somebody took you into chapter one? And Habakkuk starts the book not with rejoicing, but with doubt.

Why, God? Why do you allow this? And then even as he grows a little bit from there, his next step is still not joy. It's indignation. God, what do you mean?

That can't be the answer. That can't be the way you're going to deal with this. And maybe for you in your life, that doubt and that indignation is what resonates with you.

- [4 : 27] Rejoicing in God is the answer you know you should have, but actually how you feel when you're in trial is that, God, what are you doing? God, why is it like this?

God, how long will it be like this? And so the question we need to ask as we look at this final chapter, as we wrap up the book is, how does Habakkuk go from doubt through indignation and eventually end up at this place of God, no matter what, I'm going to rejoice in you?

What's the movement that he makes? The answer is there in chapter three, verse two. Be really good to have open in front of you. Lord, I have heard of your fame.

I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day. In our time, make them known. In wrath, remember mercy. What's shifted? What's the movement?

I have heard that there's been a message, a truth, a communication that's reoriented Habakkuk's perspective. He's still in this difficult situation, but what is this message?

- [5 : 35] What's he heard? He's heard about God's fame. He's heard about God's deeds. I mean, he's been confronted with who God is, who God's revealed himself to be in his acts and throughout history.

But this isn't new. Habakkuk's a prophet. He lives in the stories of what God's done throughout Israel's history. He's heard it so many times, but for some reason, here and now, he's heard it fresh.

He's heard it new. He's heard it again, but in a way that changes everything. And he's heard two things in particular that completely change his perspective as he deals with his struggle and with his trial.

First thing he hears, God's justice is unstoppable. God's justice is unstoppable. The book opens, Habakkuk's crying out to God about the injustice and evil that's in Israel, that's in the nation, part of God's people.

And he's longing for God to judge. But when God answers and says, don't worry, I'm going to judge, he gets really offended like, that's not the kind of judgment I wanted. I had a different idea about how this should work out.

- [6 : 48] Because God's response to Habakkuk in that moment is, I understand that you're frustrated. I understand that you don't like what you see around you. But what you need to recognize is, it's me they're rejecting.

Sure, you're dealing with some pain and some evil that exists, but all of that evil is actually a rejection of God. Even if Habakkuk has to deal with some of the circumstances.

And so God just says to Habakkuk, I know you want to see this play out the way you think is best, but it's my judgment they deserve. I'm the one they've offended. Both Israel in chapter 1, Babylon in chapter 2, both of them are going to get God's judgment for not honoring and worshiping God as he deserves.

Habakkuk needs to be clear that just because God's not doing it his way, doesn't mean he's gone soft. Doesn't mean he doesn't care. Doesn't mean he's just going to sit in heaven frustrated that it's not how it should be, but I can't do anything because I love them so much.

Judgment is certain, but it will come in God's timing because it's God's judgment to give. It's not Habakkuk's judgment to give. It's not my judgment to give. It's not your judgment to give.

[8 : 09] The only judge is God himself. God is not okay with evil. He's not okay with evil prospering. He's not okay with selfish gain. He's not okay with oppression.

He's not going to let it go on unchecked forever. Our God is a God of justice. And so on one level, Habakkuk's response is completely right.

We should be offended by the evil that we see around us. It should disgust us that the world is full of people just telling God that he doesn't matter, doing their own thing.

Every bit of pain and inequality and abuse and oppression that we see in the world that we live in is the direct result of people ignoring and rejecting God.

And so we should be offended by that. We should have this frustration and desire for God to intervene, but we should be careful as well. God's justice should also build in us a bit of humility.

[9 : 11] As we look at a world that deserves God's judgment, we need to recognize that that's us too. That if sin's the problem out there, sin's in here as well.

So I've got a problem too. It's good and right to be offended by what's out there, but are you equally offended by what's in here? Habakkuk is focused on his circumstances, on the difficulty that he's experiencing as the measure of whether or not God is just.

He's looking at this tiny little picture, but after pausing and reflecting on God's character, he realizes there's a bigger story. I just want to be clear.

One thing that the Bible makes crystal clear is that if you're doing well in life, if things are good, you're comfortable, money's flowing, job's well, you're getting promotions, that's not evidence that God approves of you.

Equally, if you're suffering, if you're struggling, if things are going wrong, that is not evidence that God disapproves of you. Chapter 2 of Habakkuk, God chooses Babylon, this evil, pagan-worshipping nation, to be the instrument of judgment.

[10 : 30] They will come in and effectively wipe out Israel in a way it will never recover from fully. They will be the most prosperous nation in the world at that time.

But we also know from chapter 2 that their judgment is just around the corner as well. We need to see more than just the immediate circumstance.

More important than the day-to-day consequence. More important than the day-to-day issues that we're wrestling with. More important than what you do or don't have is how God sees you. And you can't work that out just by focusing on your situation.

The loss that Habakkuk feels when he looks at evil people winning is real. It hurts, but it's tempered a little bit by the eternal reality that those who reject God will face judgment.

That that is an inescapable reality. Nice houses, career advancements, comfort in this life, when it's collected at the expense of obedience to and worship of God, will count for nothing.

[11 : 36] In fact, worse than that, will ultimately bring you under the judgment of God. God's justice is bigger than ours. It doesn't just exist in the here and now, in your day, in your week, in your situation, in your season of life.

God is just throughout all of time. And his justice will come whether you and I get to see it with our own eyes or not. It will come.

Because God's justice is unstoppable. It's the first thing that Habakkuk has had to reckon with. The second thing he learns here in chapter 3 is that God's justice, his wrath, and mercy actually go together.

Even in these three short chapters of Habakkuk, there's been this tension between judgment and mercy. Habakkuk's heard that there's going to be judgment on Israel. He's heard that there's going to be judgment on Babylon.

God will do this. But he's also heard of God's fame, of God's deeds, of God's reputation, that he's a God who saves. That's what he does. That's how he works.

[12 : 47] He rescues. He shows grace. And he's beginning to catch this glimpse that actually those two things always sit together. It's not wrath or mercy.

It's wrath and mercy. The way God works is to bring wrath so that there can be mercy. And so he prays in verse 2, Lord, I've heard of your fame.

I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day. In our time, make them known. In wrath, remember mercy. It's a prayer. God, do what you do. Work how you work.

Work. That's what verses 3 to 15 are about. It's this collection of stories of how God has dramatically saved them throughout history. You can chat to the kids out of Kids Church who are doing Exodus at the moment.

There's little allusions to the time when he led them through the sea, the way he judged Israel with the plagues, the way that he won battles for them as they moved into the Promised Land. God has been merciful to his people.

[13 : 51] God continues to be merciful to his people. And along the way, he continues to judge those who oppose them. Wrath and mercy come together. God's mercy isn't trumped by his justice.

It's not one or the other. God is just and merciful. Even as God proclaims his judgment for Israel and for Babylon, story after story of God pouring out on his enemies what they deserve, God is always at the same time working to rescue those who are his.

That's the one work that he's doing throughout the Bible. He's saving his people. The building agenda is God saving his people and time after time he works through wrath to achieve that outcome.

When we get to the New Testament, it's perfectly on display for us. When we get to the cross and we see Jesus there, God doesn't soften on justice at the cross.

The cross is a visible expression for us of how seriously God takes rebellion against him, of how much sin matters. But the same action of the cross is the moment of ultimate mercy.

[15 : 14] As God provides his son in our place to take our wrath, to take our judgment, to offer us forgiveness, to offer us mercy. Wrath and mercy go together because Jesus is our substitute.

The Bible is full of stories time and time again. This is how God always works. Habakkuk's demands of God have softened to become requests of the righteous God.

He's moved from, God, why aren't you doing anything? To, God, when you bring the judgment that you need to bring, please remember mercy.

Please forgive me. Please let me be part of that mercy, that saving work that you're doing. This glimpse of God that he gets as he recalls who God has revealed himself to be over and over again enables Habakkuk to see that sin lives in him.

That the issue, the problem lives in him as well. It enables him to see that the issue is deeper than his situation. It's deeper than some evil people getting away with their evil.

[16 : 33] It's deeper than there being inequality or oppression. The issue in our lives, the issue in the troubled times we face, the issue when we suffer is that we have rejected God.

And therefore, we rightly deserve his punishment. We rightly deserve the judgment that he would bring. Our situations and our circumstances, our struggles, our symptoms, they're the proof that when you reject God, there is consequences.

It's what Romans 1 talks about. When we reject God, he actually hands us over and says, okay, but you've got to live with the choice you've made. You've got to roll with what happens when you ignore what I teach you and what I show you.

And yet, so often, when we look at our difficult situations, all we see is the cause that's out there. All that we see is who else's fault it is that I'm suffering right now.

We never stop to recognize that we actually contribute, if not to our own suffering, to the suffering that exists in the world.

[17 : 46] We never stop to look at our own heart as we demand that God engage and intervene and fix things. We live in a culture that takes no responsibility.

We sue the shopping center when we fall over on their perfectly flat floor. We sue the car manufacturer when we have an accident when we were speeding but their airbag didn't function the way it's supposed to.

We don't like to take responsibility. We like to blame. It's somebody else's fault. I'm entitled to this. We need to recognize at some point that even if our situation is not directly my fault, even if the struggle and pain that you might be dealing with right now in your life is not your doing, that we're still part of the issue.

Maybe you're sick. Maybe you're struggling financially. Maybe you're lonely. And it genuinely is the fault of others. It's not your fault. I'm not telling you just change, be nicer, and your situation will be fine.

That's not the message. I'm not saying it's your fault. But as you wrestle with the results of the sins of others and how that impacts your life, the Bible says that your sin is just as serious.

[19 : 11] The Bible says that your sin is just as damaging. The Bible says that your sin has just as much impact on the world that you live in. Sin is the problem.

It's what Habakkuk's getting a glimpse of. At first, he's pointing at the evil in his own nation. Then he's pointing at the evil in Babylon. And finally, as he encounters God, he begins to understand that evil lives here too.

That God's wrath is completely justified. Until we can see that. Until you can see that the problem's here too.

Until you can see that what we need is mercy. More than intervention, what we need is mercy. More than a change in circumstances, what we need is Jesus.

The one who takes wrath for us. The one who offers forgiveness freely until we can see that he is what we need. We will never know the kind of joy that Habakkuk speaks of.

[20 : 26] What we need in our troubled times is someone who can deal with our sin. What we need is somebody who can give us the confidence that God loves us even when it might not feel like it.

What we need is some proof that God will not let this remain how it is. That he will fix it in his timing. And that in the fixing, in the justice that he will bring, that for us that will mean mercy.

Habakkuk encounters God. He's heard of God's fame. He's heard of God's deeds. But has his situation changed? From chapter 1 to chapter 3, has anything moved?

Not at all. Still the same? He's still looking down the barrel of invasion. Babylon is still coming.

And yet his response, having seen God's fame and justice, is, I will rejoice in the Lord. So what has changed?

[21 : 33] What's different? Well, like we said, on one level, nothing. All the things that were making him angry and making him doubt God are still there, but he can see them differently now.

I mean, listen to the response he has to what he's heard. James read it out for us. He hears of God's fame and he hears of God's deeds. And it doesn't even say this was an angelic vision.

There's not some blinding white messenger speaking these words. It just seems like he's heard it and he's recalled it. And his response to who God is, to who God's revealed himself to be in history is this.

Verse 16. Have a look. I heard and my heart pounded. My lips quivered at the sound. Decay crept into my bones and my legs trembled.

Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Suddenly, having taken a moment, he remembers who he's talking to.

[22 : 39] He is challenging the God of heaven, the creator, the one who holds the entire creation in his hand, sustains it by his very will, the infinite and good God.

Just hearing about how that God has engaged in our history, just hearing what he's done and who he is, brings a physical reaction from Habakkuk.

Have you ever sat in church, reading the Bible, and heard of the wonder of God and realized with this kind of humility who it is that we're meeting with right now? Who it is who's speaking to us?

All that's left for Habakkuk when he is faced with the God Almighty, the just and merciful God, is patient waiting.

Patient waiting for God to do what God does, what God has always done, what God will always do. Judge wickedness and save those who belong to him.

[23 : 45] It's happened before. It keeps happening. It's going to keep happening. Finally confronted with that reality. All he can do is humbly wait.

Patiently wait. But not even just patiently wait. Joyful, almost defiant waiting. Not just I'm going to grip my teeth and tolerate this, but look at verse 17.

Having encountered God, he says, though the fig tree does not bud, there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the field produces no food, though there are no sheep in the pen, no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

I will be joyful in God my Savior. The sovereign Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer. He enables me to tread on the heights.

Situation and circumstance are no longer the basis on which Habakkuk will despair or rejoice. That's not how he decides whether or not things are good or bad, no matter what happens.

[24 : 54] Regardless of circumstance, in the worst possible picture he can paint. Like, verse 17 doesn't make a lot of sense to us right now. We're not farmers. We're not dependent on the trees producing at certain times.

We're not worrying about how many animals are in the stalls. As long as Coles has got stock shelves, we're okay. The picture he's painting is starvation, homelessness, loneliness, isolation.

Everything is going wrong, yet I will rejoice. What's changed for him is the starting point.

See, at the beginning of this book, Habakkuk gets his situation, he gets all worked up and he takes it to God and says, God, look at what I'm dealing with. Look at what I have to put up with.

And there's a real rightness to that. God invites us to bring our struggles to him. But by the end of this book, just a few short chapters, he's now taking God to his circumstances and saying, hey, look at my God.

[26 : 03] Look at who I follow. Look at how he works. Look at the power that he has. Look at what he always does. Look at the reality that you're ignoring. He's saying, my God is unstoppable.

When I first started school, I remember getting in trouble occasionally. Nothing drastic. Just talking too much. Not finishing my work. That sort of thing. And my teacher's go-to threat was, if you keep doing this, I will call your parents.

It freaked me out. I remember thinking, I'm going to get smacked or grounded on top of having to do detention or pick up papers or something. So usually that threat was enough to keep me in line.

Now, I'm sure that you won't be surprised to hear that eventually I did cross the line. I can't remember exactly what I did. But I do remember standing next to the teacher after class as she called my parents.

She was pretty worked up about whatever I'd done. Again, I don't remember what it was. And so she started the conversation with a fair bit of energy, talking with a lot of enthusiasm and anger to, I think it was my dad at the time.

[27 : 17] Progressively, as the conversation went on, she became more subdued. And at the end of the conversation, she hung up the phone and she dismissed me and didn't say anything. Now, I had no idea what was going on in that phone call, so I assumed I was in trouble and spent the rest of the day dreading the return home and what kind of fierce punishment would await me.

When I eventually got there, my dad sat me down for a chat. He didn't yell. He asked me my side of the story. And then he made something clear to me that has stuck with me ever since.

He said, you need to know you're my son and I've got your back. Now, this isn't a blank check. He wasn't saying do whatever you want at school.

There'll be no consequences. In fact, there was some pretty significant consequences on some other occasions. But the point he wanted me to understand is that he was my dad.

He wasn't a threat that could be used against me. The default for our relationship was he loved me and no one else had the power to mess with that. He would love me just as much if I did the wrong thing as he would when I did the right thing.

[28 : 28] He loved me enough to trust me and ask me my side of the story even though I was a 14-year-old kid and there was an adult teacher saying what kind of a person I was. And he wouldn't assume.

What that meant was for the rest of my school career, again, on the very rare occasion that a teacher threatened to contact my parents. Okay, maybe it wasn't that rare. But when it did happen, I wasn't scared.

They were trying to use this situation and use what I'd done and use what was around me to try and scare me into thinking that my parents were going to be super angry. But it didn't work because I knew my parents and I knew my parents loved me more than that.

Now, the point isn't, hey, we're loved by God, we can do whatever we want. The point is that when we change our starting point, we can actually sit in the challenge and struggle, in the trial, in the pain, secure that our God's justice is unstoppable.

Secure that His love for us is constant and unfailing. When you encounter pain and suffering in your life, when things are not the way that you want them to be, when that drags out for seasons and weeks and months and years, we engage that knowing God's wrath and mercy go together.

[29 : 55] Knowing those that, that they're bigger and more powerful than our situation. And so as we start to struggle, as we start to drown, instead of taking our situation to God, we just quickly point to our God.

We remind ourselves that He has always come through with justice. and He will not fail. We remind ourselves that He has always come through with mercy.

He faithfully rescues and forgives His people and so we rejoice. Because no matter what you are sitting in right now, and I'm not trying to say it doesn't hurt, but no matter what you are in right now, no matter what you face in life, when you know your God, you know two things.

You know He loves you and you know nothing can change that and you know that justice will come. That whatever injustice you are experiencing and suffering because of right now will not be forever.

We have the gift that Habakkuk did not. We stand thousands of years after Him, this side of Jesus. We've got a new set of challenges in our lives, we've got a new set of struggles, we live in a different world in a bunch of ways, but we're asking the exact same questions.

[31 : 15] It could be that you arrived here right now and those questions are on the tip of your tongue. Why God? Why are you leaving me here? When God, will you intervene?

Not like that God, I've got a better idea. And God's incredible answer to us is Jesus. God's answer is to send an innocent Savior to die on the cross so that you're forgiven.

God's answer is to give you the grace of inviting you into His family that you might know the secure and immovable love of being called a son and a daughter so that we might look to what He's already done, look to Jesus' death for us and know that our God is now, was before and always will be the God who judges evil.

But gives grace to unworthy people like us. We know that our God will not let the guilty go unpunished and yet we know His mercy never fails.

We can walk into situations and circumstances and struggles and trials confident pointing at our God, pointing at the empty cross and the empty tomb and Jesus on the throne in heaven and say, you don't have power over me anymore because I'm loved by the God who's in charge.

[32 : 34] How do we get there? How do we move? How does this not just be some intimidating ideal that we can't quite attain?

Well, how did Habakkuk get there? He heard. He heard. He listens to.

He recounts. He recalls. He remembers the fame of His God, the deeds of His God. This chapter, chapter 3, did you notice those weird little bits at the beginning and the end? This is like a corporate prayer.

That's what those instructions are about. It's a prayer they would have said together as a nation of Israel. They're training themselves to remember who God is. They're hearing regularly. That's right. Our God is just.

His justice never fails. That's right. Our God is merciful. Remember what He did time and time again? And they would hear so that they could wait patiently.

[33 : 36] Habakkuk journeys from doubt through indignation to kind of humble adoration and ends in this place of bold, joyful faith. Because He hears.

The invitation for you, wherever you are right now, whether you're in that place of doubt, whether you're traveling fantastically, and this is all hypothetical, the idea of suffering and troubled times, wherever you're at, the invitation is to hear.

The invitation is to see, to remember, to listen, to be reminded that the God you follow is good, is just, is faithful, is merciful.

It's to hear, to see, to listen, to look, and to remember Jesus. And then to rejoice in Him. To enjoy Him in your darkness.

To know security and stability in your uncertainty. Though money might be tight, friendships might be broken, people might hurt you and let you down, you might lose your job, obedience to Jesus might cost you temporary pleasures, there will be pain and loss.

[34 : 53] And yet the invitation is to find joy in the faithful, constant, and unchanging love of God. Lord, I have heard of your fame.

I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day. In our time, make them known. In wrath, remember mercy. Let's pray.

Father God, we want to come before you and acknowledge that this is a step, this is a journey, this is a movement that we need to make, this is not easy.

And so Father, we ask that you would help us to hear, help us to see, in the pit, in the valley, open our eyes to remember our Savior, our risen Savior, our victorious Savior.

Give us the confidence confidence, to trust in your justice and your timing. Give us the security of knowing your mercy and your love to us in Jesus.

[35 : 57] Empower us to rejoice in every trial and every season so that the world around us may know the hope, the love, the forgiveness, the grace that is only found in Jesus. Amen.

Amen.