

A Prayer-Song for New Year

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Preacher: Rev James Maciver

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn back now for a short time to Habakkuk chapter 3, where we read the Old Testament Habakkuk chapter 3. Looking really at the whole chapter, but we can read near the end of the chapter from verse 17.

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the prodges 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 my high places.

What relevance does the book of Habakkuk have for a new year? Where can we find guidance for a new year within such an old portion of literature?

What is there in this chapter, which seems to be full of so much emphasis on judgment and God's dealings with his enemies and judgment, what is there there positively that we can take with us for our benefit into this new year?

[1 : 15] Well, I hope by the time we finish our study this morning that we can find much here that will encourage us and give us a positive direction as we begin a new year today and want to carry certain principles with us into this new year individually and as a congregation.

Two things that mark the time of Habakkuk, who was a contemporary of Jeremiah, or most of the time of Habakkuk's ministry.

We don't know much about him, but his references point to his being in the prophetic ministry at the time of Jeremiah.

And the two things that really marked that particular time in the crisis of the times were, first of all, the expansion of Babylon as a world power to take over from the Assyrian Empire, which had been in place for some time before that.

And then corresponding to that and alongside of that was the decay that had come into the people and the practices of the people of Judah, to which Habakkuk belonged. And you'll find that, of course, in the likes of Jeremiah as well, in a much greater detail than Habakkuk gives us.

[2 : 32] And Habakkuk, in seeing the way in which the Babylonian people were going to come and invade his native land and overtake the culture and indeed the practices that God had given to them, he had questions to put to God.

And it's unusual, in a sense, Habakkuk is unusual from this point of view, that the book is not, as the other prophets are, an announcement to the people as such. The book is, in many ways, an answer to the questions of his own soul.

The questions that he put to God, in fact, as you find at the beginning of the book of Habakkuk, O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear?

Or cry to you, violence, and you will not save? Why do you make me see iniquity? Why do you look idly at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me.

Strife and contention arise. So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous, so justice goes forth.

[3 : 46] Perverted. That's his perplexity. He's actually seeing God's enemies coming increasingly to overtake them as a people, as the covenant people of God.

And he's asking the Lord the question, what is this about? Why is this being allowed? Why do I have to go through this agony of seeing the religious culture that I belong to, and that is precious to me, overtaken by that foreign culture that is pagan and anti-God?

And you can relate that to your own questioning today, perhaps, as we see increasingly in certain parts of our land, and indeed to some extent in our own localities as well, a culture that is not

gospel-friendly, a culture that is set upon removing that culture of the gospel, as it seeks increasingly to invade what the gospel has occupied for so many generations.

Why is it happening? What do we do about it? How do we respond to it? As well as bringing our questions or our perplexity of mind to God, is there anything else that is required of us that we can do in relation to that particular problem?

So you can see immediately from that there's a correspondence in principle between the situation Habakkuk was in and the one we find ourselves in today.

[5 : 19] And it's, of course, adding to Habakkuk's distress where God answers him, verses 5 to 11 of chapter 1, God is emphasizing for him, You're right!

I am going to bring the Chaldeans, these are the Babylonians, I'm going to bring them over this land, that's what's going to happen. But of course, Habakkuk knows, and God re-emphasizes for him, that the bottom line in all of that is the people's transgression, their departure from the ways of the Lord, their abandonment of the worship of God, and its replacement by idolatry.

And it's been going on for so long, and the prophets have not been listened to, and now God is emphasizing this is indeed what the immediate future holds.

That's indeed what's going to happen. But in chapter 2, you then find an emphasis on the rightness, or the righteousness of God's government.

That whatever happens in the history of his people is never outwith his absolute control. And not only is it not outwith his absolute control, but it's always directed by his wisdom.

[6 : 39] And that's where Hezekiah is pointed to by God, he's pointed to not only the sovereignty of God, but the wisdom of God, the way in which God, in his righteous government, always acts consistently with himself.

And that leads, in chapter 3, to Habakkuk's great prayer song, if you like. We can call it a prayer song for New Year, for this New Year, because it's not just a prayer, it's also in the form of a psalm, or a song to be sung.

You'll find these musical elements at the beginning, according to Shegionoth, at the end to the choir master, with stringed instruments. So it's formed by Habakkuk, not just as a prayer, but as a prayer to be sung, like many of the psalms are.

And we'll see some of the relevance of that, too, as we look at it shortly. So that's really Habakkuk's response. And his response, you could say, in chapter 3, the key to it really is in the way in which she, there in chapter 2, is said by God, the righteous shall live by his faith.

The righteous shall live by his faith. That's really verse 4 of chapter 2, the key, in fact, to God's response to his questions.

[8 : 11] And that, of course, as you know, is a verse that Paul took into his letters, in many respects, Galatians and Romans, revolve around that particular statement.

The righteous shall live by faith. But you find it, firstly, in the prophecy of Habakkuk. That's where Paul found it. That's where Paul took it from.

That's the principle, really, that we carry with us into this new year that marks the way in which Habakkuk sets out his great prayer song in chapter 3.

First of all, he's praying for God to revive his work. Now, that's in the first part of the chapter, really down as far as verse 15, especially, where you find him praying for God to revive his work.

In the midst of the years, he says in verse 2, revive it. Your work, O Lord, do I fear. In the midst of the years, revive it. In the midst of the years, make it known.

[9 : 09] In wrath, remember mercy. But it's interesting and important, as we said, that this is set for music. We mentioned the beginning and the end of the chapter.

And that means that it's right for us today that we do celebrate the work of God, not just the work that pleases us, the work that we find easier to understand, that we praise the work of God and praise the God whose sovereignty and whose plan is being outworked in the history of the world in its own generation as well.

It's right for us that we indeed praise that work of God, whatever it means to us, whatever we find, whether it's the judgment of his enemies in order to give salvation to his people or the way that he deals with his people to revive them, to quicken them, to guide them.

It's there so that we praise him. It's so important that we recognize that Habakkuk's questions don't end in fatalism or in just a skepticism or a stoic acceptance of things that just says as if he were throwing it back to God and saying, well, okay, you're sovereign, so I'd better just accept it and just

get on with life.

That's not what he does. He accepts the sovereignty of God. He accepts the wisdom of God. He knows that all of these things are being directed by God in his righteous government, but it's something that he's going to praise God for.

[10 : 39] He's come now to actually engage in worship and in praise throughout this great chapter, this prayer song of Habakkuk. And throughout this coming year, as God spares us, we're going to have times when we struggle.

We're going to have struggling hearts. We're going to have things in our experience that to some extent or other will give us perplexity and questions.

What do we do? What is the best course to take? Well, struggling hearts need one thing above everything else, and that is worship.

The worship of God. Struggling hearts bring themselves into the worship of God. Whether it's on a personal level or congregationally, it's important that for our struggling hearts, we think all the time of worship.

And when you come to struggle through this year, remember that the best thing you can do is turn to worship God. Come to where he is worship or worship him yourself at times where you need on your knees between yourself and God.

[11 : 51] But don't abandon the principles and the practice of worship. Don't let the things that really cause you pain turn away from the worship of God. Don't let the enemy of your soul suggest to you for a moment the best thing you can do is turn aside from the ways of God and take up something else instead.

Struggling hearts need worship. Need the context of worship. Need the context of praising God. That's in Psalm 73. We often refer to it as the Psalmist perplexity in looking at the world around him and those who lived without God and how things seemed to be going so well with them.

And he was filled with pains, with worries, with anxieties. Of course he was. He knew the reality of eternity. The world doesn't. And in many ways that's when you come to really as you see things properly.

It's then that certain anxieties entered into your life. Whether they're right or wrong is not the question for the moment. But they're there because you have a new perspective on life. You've been born again.

[12 : 54] You see things in reality. Many times I could say myself before the Lord entered into my life that flying, for example, going by air from one place to another wasn't a problem.

I never thought of it as being something to be afraid of. Strangely as it might seem once conversion had taken place, I then was much more afraid of flying than I was previously.

Why? Because I saw the things of eternity in a different light. I knew the reality of death and of judgment and of meeting God and of giving an account to God. So things take on a new perspective.

I'm not suggesting it so that you can actually then come to look gloomily at life. But look at it in real terms is what it's saying to us. That's what Habakkuk is saying to us.

That we look at things as they are in reality. Not as we would like them to be or as the world will tell them they ought to be. But as God says they are.

[13 : 58] And our struggling hearts need worship and the worship in which faith is prominent. It is by faith that we persevere, that we go on, that we continue to trust in the Lord, that we look to the Lord and His provision, not what we can manufacture ourselves.

But as He's setting it out in praise, His prayer for God to revive His work, He appeals for God to act. As you go through the chapter you'll find, as we read through it, elements that remind you of the likes of the giving of the law on Mount Sinai, passing through the Red Sea as the people were taken from Egypt and on towards the Promised Land.

There are so many descriptions there. The mountains, the raging seas, the deep, to do with the creation and God's use of the creation and His mastery of the creation to lead His people onwards. And Habakkuk is taking all of that together and really now appealing in verse 2 there for God to act again as He did then. Revive your work.

Lord, I heard of your work. I know the report of you. So in the midst of the years, revive it. In the midst of the years, make it known. As you look over the history of this congregation, as you look over its recent history indeed, even within the last century you might say, you'll find times of spiritual

revival, of spiritual quickening and spiritual work as God blessed the gospel.

[15 : 36] you'll find times when communions had maybe a dozen or more people coming to confess their faith, coming to take communion for the first time.

You might say, well, these days are gone. Yes, to some extent they might be gone, but why are they gone? In principle, they're not gone. God is the same. And our appeal to Him in this year is, Lord, I know your ways.

I belong to a congregation that has known your blessing. That continues in many ways to know your blessing. But as I look to the past, Lord, I hear of these great tremendous things that you did.

And Lord, please, will that not be so in our generation in my lifetime again? In the midst of the years make known, revive your work.

And then he comes to say, in wrath, remember mercy. You see, Habakkuk is saying, Lord, what you're going to do in bringing these Babylonians like a flood upon us is right for you to do.

[16 : 39] We deserve it. We're not what we should be. But Lord, in your wrath, remember mercy. And so we apply that to our own generation.

That God, if He is to bring further judgment upon us, if we are to have further encroachment or invasion of a culture that really is opposed to the gospel, if it increasingly takes over from where the gospel has been rooted, what are we going to do?

We're going to do what Habakkuk and what Jeremiah at the same time was doing. I will stand, he said, on my watchtower. I will stand and wait to see what the Lord will actually do.

I'm not going to be deflected, he's saying, from the relationship I have with God, from continuing to pray to Him and quietly and believingly waiting for the Lord, not only in what He's going to do immediately, but as we'll see in a minute, what He's actually going to do in the future when He crushes His enemies finally, finally, it may not be in our lifetime, but it's going to happen and what He's calling upon us to do is look at the Lord's work and ask that the Lord will revive His work and in wrath that He will remember mercy.

He's praying for God to revive His work. Wouldn't you like to see all these empty pews filled? It's most encouraging to see that so many of them are filled here today.

[18 : 25] There's nothing more encouraging than seeing people coming seriously, earnestly, genuinely to attend the gospel, to be participants in worship, participants in worship, to come to express their worship to God collectively, together, as you are here and as you've been doing.

what a great encouragement that is to me as your minister and as a preacher of the gospel. But there are still empty seats. Another prayer to God at this new year is to be, Lord, in the midst of the years, revive your work.

Give us the problem of having too few seats, too few pews for the number of people who want to occupy them. And of course, that relates to all the methods and exercises and practices that we have in reaching out with the gospel as they fit into this great prayer for God to revive his work in the midst of the year.

This is not Habakkuk saying, all I need to do is just sit down and pray and I'll wait for God to do it and there's nothing else that I can do. That's not really saying at all, we're not to take that sort of conclusion from these words.

But what he is saying assuredly to us is this, that as we wait upon the Lord, as we acknowledge his sovereignty, as we look to him as our king, so we appeal to him, Lord, in the midst of the years, revive your work.

[20 : 03] Come and show us again the strength of your arm. Come and demonstrate for our generation that you are God, that your word is superior to every philosophy that threatens it and bring people increasingly to accept it and to honor it.

Well, he prays for the Lord to revive his work. He patiently waits for God to work in verses 16 through to 19 there. Verse 16, I hear, and my body trembles, my lips quiver at the sound, rottenness enters into my bones, my legs tremble beneath me, yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.

You see, he's not just saying, I'm going to quietly wait for these people to come to invade us, I'm going to look beyond that. I'm looking beyond this to the day when you will deal with them and when you will demonstrate that you are God and you are the righteous one.

And then he says, although it will be in my case that the fig tree should not blossom nor fruit beyond the vines, yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

I will take joy in the God of my salvation. Well, you see, he's saying, Lord, I accept and I'm awed and I'm humbled in your presence as I think about your government, as I think about your sovereignty, your greatness, the way in which your mastery governs my life, the way in which you cover the whole nation that I belong to with your sovereign government and with your wisdom in all of these things.

[21 : 43] So he's saying, Lord, I quiver at the sound of that. I am in awe, I've got weakness in my legs as I think of how awesome God is.

But it's not so that he will then be plunged into gloom and sadness and darkness. It's so that we, like him, will come to say, well, nevertheless, I'm going to rejoice in my God. even through this period of difficulty, Luke is saying there there's no fruit in the vines, fields yield no food, the flocks are cut off from the herd, there's no herd in the stalls, difficulties for a people who relied on those things for their everyday well-being and in the judgment of God, that's going to decrease, it's going to diminish, but he says, I'm still going to rejoice in my God. And that's really the positive emphasis we take into this new year. There may be times in our life, and even in our personal experience this year, when we cannot have the satisfaction of much fruit on our vines, a diminishing in our own spiritual returns, what are we going to do? Will we despair? Will we say there's no point in going on? Will we say, well, I'll just have to slacken my commitment to the Lord? Will we listen to those who say, you know, it's not worth your while being a Christian.

[23 : 28] It's going to end in defeat and disaster. Secularism is going to overtake this world. Religion is going to go out the window, including the Christian religion. Of course we're not going to accept that.

We know better. The righteous shall live by their faith. And in faith, we face our day as they faced their day in the world of Habakkuk.

Habakkuk. And so we ask ourselves questions today. Are we humbled enough before the greatness of God? Have we come like Habakkuk to really think deeply into the sovereignty of God in relation to the events of our times?

Do we look at the events that take place in our world, the great events that take place in our world, in our day, in order to see and ask, where can I find God's hand in that?

Where can I see God's sovereignty in that? Where can I see God's government in that? Do we just question God and leave it at that?

[24 : 46] Do we ask the question, is the church the problem? Am I the problem? is the church's lifestyle, the church's lack of obedience, the church's lack of faithfulness, I'm thinking of the church in much wider terms than the free church, but not excluding it, is the church in its unfaithfulness to Scripture and to God at the root of the problem that's bringing such an anti-gospel culture to invade us and to surround us and to threaten to overtake us.

If it is, then one of my main prayers has to be, Lord, revive your work, revive your church, revive your people, revive us, give us a renewed vision, give us a renewed commitment, because that's what Habakkuk is really teaching us when he has this prayer and when he patiently waits for God to work.

But he's coming to say, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will take joy in the God of my salvation. Now, some people might say, well, that's just resignation, acceptance of things, and that's it, that's, you could say, that's just escapism, that's just Habakkuk accepting there's nothing much you can do about the situation, so he's just trying to escape into this outward confession of rejoicing in God, and that's basically just an escape from reality.

Of course, Christians will consistently be accused of that, in the way that they say, well, I'm still going to stick with God, I'm still going to pursue my life of faith, and the world will say to you, you're a fool.

Why don't you accept reality? These things are running out. No, he's not just a mere acceptance of it, it's not just a stoic acceptance and a putting up with things, it's a rejoicing, it's a genuine joy in his God, he's rejoicing in the sovereignty of God, he's rejoicing in the wisdom and the mastery of God, he's rejoicing in the overall view that God gives him of a plan that is going to deal at last with the wicked and with the enemies of God, where they are going to be judged, and where God will set his people free, and where he will set them free for all eternity.

[27 : 25] Are we anticipating that? Rejoicing in the moment, in the prospect of it? Rejoicing in the victory of Christ? Rejoicing in God's triumph over sin, over worldliness, over all opposition to him,

how that has been already achieved in the resurrection of Christ?

Are we today beginning a new year? Whatever is the case outwardly in our condition, whatever threatens to overwhelm us, however much we see in our day, of anti-gospel movements, are we rejoicing in God?

Because that's what Hezekiah, sorry, Habakkuk, is drawing our minds to, to say when we appreciate something of the greatness of this God as our God, the greatness of this covenant God as our faithful God, then we say with Him, yet, for all that this is going to be in the immediate future, and in the present times, I will rejoice.

In the Lord, I will take joy in the God of my salvation. Now, let's take that with us, into this new year for us as a people, as a congregation.

There is nothing greater, nothing more useful, more beneficial to ourselves than we can do than to rejoice in the Lord, to accept His hand, and to say, Lord, help me to sing Your praise, even when I don't understand Your ways.

[29 : 20] Help me to give praise and to honour You with worship, even when my heart questions why I see things as they are around me.

And the one thing therefore that fills this prayer song of Habakkuk is God Himself, God in His greatness, God as His covenant king, God whose ways are always right.

God. In 1715, Louis XIV, one of the greatest kings of Europe at that time or any other time, who reigned in France for 72 years, was buried.

The service, his funeral service, took place from Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. He wanted to be known as the Sun King, grand, opulent, a reign distinguished and marked by that sort of grandness. Everything was rich, everything was set out in grand terms in keeping with his grand vanity. And yet given instructions, you can imagine after all of these years reigning and all of this magnificence during the course of his reign and indeed the success he'd had politically as well to some extent, you can imagine after such a long time and such a grand, opulent reign, now he's dead.

[31 : 13] And this is the occasion of his funeral. You can imagine how people would have been thinking about this grand, and opulent king. And in the cathedral in Notre Dame, his coffin is situated near the front of the cathedral and he had given instructions that the whole cathedral was to be in darkness apart from one candle which was to be placed on his coffin.

Drawing attention, of course, as he thought it, to the most important person and the most important thing in the whole place and that was him. Even though he's now dead. One of the great preachers of the time presided over the service, Jean-Baptiste Massillon.

He walked slowly up to the coffin with that little candle, or great candle, I don't know how big it was. The only light in the whole cathedral, knowing what Louis had actually specified regarding the service, this is the only thing that's to be noted, the only light in the place.

He went up and he went psht, he snuffed it out. And at the same time he said twice, God alone is great.

Only God is great. great. Just imagine the impact of that moment, snuffing out the light that represented the sun king and his magnificence, and instead saying, only God is great.

[33 : 05] great. That's our new year motto, isn't it? Only God is great, except that you can add, this is our God.

He will guide us, even unto death. Let's pray. Lord, help us to celebrate the fact of your greatness, and help us to do it, O Lord, in our day.

And in our circumstances, to praise you for your greatness, which includes your wisdom and all the aspects of your government.

Help us to do it in our lives personally, in our life as a congregation and as a denomination. We pray, Lord, that you would revive your work in our nation, that our people may also come to have that confession that God alone is great.

we pray that you would grant us blessing at all times to follow your word and now too, and help us in this great prayer song of Habakkuk, to hide in our hearts the wisdom that you have given to us in this song, and enable us to carry it through into all aspects of our life.

[34 : 26] For Jesus' sake. Amen. We'll sing now in conclusion in Psalm 73. Psalm 73 on page 95.

We're going to sing verses 21 to 28. So that's page 96. 21 to 28 of Psalm 73.

When my spirit was embittered and my heart with grief brought low, like a beast I was before you dull in understanding slow, yet, O Lord, you hold my right hand, with you I will always go.

And so on through to the end of the psalm. let's stand to sing. Amen. And that will be in the same song, sorry.

And my spirit was embittered and my heart with grief brought low, like a beast I was before you, dull in understanding slow, yet, O Lord, you hold my right hand, with you I will always go.

[36 : 34] Through your glory you will bring me with your counsel as my guide.

I have none but you in heaven, all on earth I lay aside.

Flesh and heart may fill but but ever God my portion will abide.

Most far all from you will perish, you give them their due reward.

As for me it is a blessing to be near the sovereign Lord, I have made my God my refuge, all your deeds I will report.

[37 : 48] I'll go to the main door after the benediction. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always.

Amen.