

Christianityworks
How Long O God, How Long?
059-4
What a Mighty Celebration

When we open our hearts to His Word, His Spirit will bring healing to our hearts. His Spirit will bring joy and peace to our hearts. His Spirit will put His praises on our lips.

The Prayer of a Prophet

It's great to be with you again this week on the programme. You know, I have been so enjoying getting into God's Word through this Old Testament prophet, Habakkuk. I know it's kind of a weird name and it's easy to think, 'What does some stuffy old prophet have to do with my life today?' But as you'll know if you have joined me over these last few weeks, Habakkuk cried out to God about the injustice that was going on amongst His people, God's people – the violence, the evil – and old Habakkuk cries out to God, 'Why do you let this go on and how long ... how long O God, how long?'

Sounds a bit familiar, doesn't it? And yet as Habakkuk has his conversation with God and God explains what's going on, Habakkuk gets a completely different perspective. All of a sudden he sees what God sees – that none of this wickedness is going to go unpunished – that one day ... one day, either the wicked who are oppressing us and hurting us with all their injustices today, one day either they will turn from their wickedness and receive God's forgiveness through Jesus or they will be judged and they will be punished. And this is the truth that changes Habakkuk's heart.

This fresh new perspective completely and radically changes Habakkuk. The circumstances themselves don't change, as we read this Old Testament Book – what changes is Habakkuk because he has heard God speak and what God said makes sense. See, Habakkuk starts off his conversation with God with these words and we have looked at them a few times now over the last few weeks. If you have a Bible, open it up at this Old Testament Book, Habakkuk chapter 1. I'm reading from verses 2 to 4:

"O Lord, how long shall I cry out for help and you will not listen?

Or cry to you, "Violence" and you will not save?

Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous – therefore judgement becomes perverted.”

That’s how he starts off, but now ... now look at how he finishes. We are going to go to Habakkuk chapter 3 today – the prayer of the prophet. There is something in this for all of us – for you and for me. It’s written in picture language – Hebrews of old loved picture language. Listen how Habakkuk takes God’s Words and paints a picture with them. Have a look at the picture that he’s painting – Habakkuk chapter 3, beginning at verse 2:

“O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work.

In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy.

God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran.

His glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.

The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hand, where his power lay hidden.

Before him went pestilence, and plague followed close behind.

He stopped and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble.

The eternal mountains were shattered; along his ancient pathways the everlasting hills sank low.

I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction; the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled.

Was your wrath against the rivers, O Lord?

Or your anger against the rivers, or your rage against the sea, when you drove your horses, your chariots to victory?

You brandished your naked bow, sated were the arrows at your command.

You split the earth with rivers.

The mountains saw you, and writhed; a torrent of water swept by; the deep gave forth its voice.

The sun raised high its hands; the moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear.

In fury you trod the earth, in anger you trampled the nations.

You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed.

You crushed the head of the wicked house, laying it bear from the foundation to the roof.

You pierced with his own arrows the head of his warriors,

who came like a whirlwind to scatter us, gloating as if ready to devour the poor who were in hiding. You trampled the sea with your horses, churning the mighty waters."

Now how did you go seeing the picture that is being painted here, like poetry? Habakkuk looks at the heavens and the earth and the mountains and the sky and the history of Israel; the things that have happened; the things that they see every day and all of a sudden, he's looking at them with a fresh set of eyes; he's seeing God's hands in everything. He is looking at them afresh and going, "Wow! Look, all along God's been in this place and I just didn't realise it." And his spirit soars up to meet God.

Let's look at just a couple of verses here – chapter 3, verse 2: "Lord, I have heard of your renown, I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy." 'Hang on a minute,' Habakkuk is saying to God, 'I get it now. I've heard; I remember – You're coming – a God of judgement and of mercy.' Remember here the context is that God is going to judge His whole Nation and yet Habakkuk sees God's glory and His purpose in all of that. He remembers the God of old:

*"His glory covered the heavens, the earth was full of his praise.
The brightness was like the sun; rays came forth from his hands where his power was hidden.
Before him went pestilence and plague followed behind. He stopped and shook the earth; he looked and made the nations tremble.
The eternal mountains were shattered; along his ancient pathways the everlasting hills sank low."*

The whole of creation, Habakkuk is realising, is subject to the power of God – everything that happens – everything that goes on. 'I was looking at it the wrong way,' Habakkuk's saying, 'now ... now I get it; now I see it.' Habakkuk gets a completely different perspective on all this rubbish that's going on in the Nation of Israel.

I wonder whether that isn't what God wants us to get, when like Habakkuk, we're crying, 'How long O God, how long?' Every day we see injustices through our own eyes, just like Habakkuk. And what we see sometimes is doom and gloom and violence and injustice and we carry heavy burdens, just like Habakkuk but when we chat with God, He gives us a whole new perspective.

All of a sudden when we see this whole calamitous world through His eyes; His Spirit opens our eyes and shines a light in our hearts and all of a sudden, when there was misery and gloom and questioning on our lips, God replaces that by putting His praise on our lips - our spirit sores up to meet His Spirit. All of a sudden, we meet Him because we realise He is the mighty and sovereign and all powerful, all loving God.

Can I tell you something ... something from my own bittersweet experience? The darker the night is, the brighter His light shines but because we are human, the bigger the problems and injustices and pains of this world are, the smaller our God seems. We lose sight of God - we see things from our tiny human vantage point and with Habakkuk, it's time to discover something: our King reigns.

This mighty God, this wonderful God, this loving God in our darkest hour, He hasn't forsaken us. This God is still mighty, still wonderful, still loving, even in our darkest hour He is still awesome and still powerful and even more than that, He's right here with us. That's what the Spirit of God spoke to Habakkuk. That's what the Spirit of God is speaking right now to anyone who will listen and that is what puts His praise on our lips.

Trust and Joy

Now as we draw towards the end of this Book of Habakkuk, what we discover is that God's saved the very best till last. Now, I'd love to tell you that this was my idea that we put it in the last programme but if I did that I'd be lying. It's very definitely God's idea. Like a good movie or a good book, you get to the end and it all comes together and you go, 'WOW, WOW!' Well, that's what today's about - it's the WOW day and if that doesn't make you stick around with me over the next twenty minutes or so, I don't know what will.

Now we have all seen it, we've all experienced it - Habakkuk's cry to God about the wickedness and the evil and the injustice going on around him and he says, 'How long, O God, how long?' - the impact of other people's evil ways on our lives. We have all experienced injustice - sometimes it happens on the National scale; sometimes it happens just at a personal level and when it does we have that same cry that Habakkuk had toward God: 'How long O Lord, how long?'

We want to know why and how long but God ... God so often has a different way. It's the way that He shared with Habakkuk when this man of God poured out the burden of his heart to God - Habakkuk

cries out to God and God answers him with a vision ... a vision of the punishment that will come upon the wicked; a vision of the power of God over every wicked man and every wicked deed.

Have a listen to Habakkuk chapter 2, verses 12 and 14:

*"Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed, and establishes a town by crime!
For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."*

As we saw earlier it is this vision of God's righteous judgement; God's justice that completely changes Habakkuk's perspective. He goes from being a man who sees things from the bottom up; from a human viewpoint, to being a man who sees things from the top down; from God's viewpoint.

And you know the more we listen to God; the more we spend time understanding how God sees things, the more we allow His Word to become a part of who we are and how we think and how we behave, the more we experience the thing that Habakkuk received from God.

It's the thing we discover in the last few verses at the end of this short Book, Habakkuk. It's what comes after finally ... finally Habakkuk gets it – he sees the glory and the power of God. He praises God from the midst of the injustice and the violence and then the impact ... then the thing that happened deep within him. Have a listen with me because this is the thing that God wants you and me to get today. He wants us to experience this. It begins in Habakkuk chapter 3, beginning at verse 16. Habakkuk writes:

*"I hear and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound.
Rottenness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble beneath me.
I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us.
Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet will I rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,*

and makes me to tread upon the heights.

This is such a beautiful picture of a man who discovered the peace and the joy and the power of God in the midst of the violence and the wickedness and injustice. A man who was such a blessing to me in my early Christian walk was a quiet man called Steve. Now Steve was no great preacher but he had such a wonderful heart for God and he lived that out as a chaplain amongst the elderly and I tell you, he was just the right man for that job.

But I remember him preaching once at our little church all those years ago and he said something that stuck with me ever since. He said this: he said 'Peace is trusting in the sovereignty of God.' Let me say that again: 'Peace is trusting in the sovereignty of God' and that's exactly what's happened here for Habakkuk.

Have another listen:

*"I hear, and I tremble within; my lips quiver at the sound.
Rottenness enters into my bones, and my steps tremble
beneath me.
I will wait quietly for the day of calamity to come on the
people who attack us."*

This man has the fear of God in him - he trembles, his lips quiver, he knows the decay, the rottenness in his own bones, his steps tremble - this is the fear of the Lord. But look at the impact of that right fear - "*I will wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us.*" 'I will wait quietly' because what I know is that God's going to act; He's going to judge those who are doing evil; He's going to judge His people, Israel and it will be a day of calamity.

And can I tell you? That day came just a few years later. God's people turned against Him - God used the Chaldeans (the Babylonians), He had Jerusalem destroyed, the temple destroyed and God's own people were led into captivity for seventy years in Babylon.

What a terrible cycle of events? What a calamity this mighty God was going to bring on His people? But the only men who saw it coming were a handful of God's prophets. Habakkuk was one of them and he was able to wait quietly for this day of calamity. Habakkuk had peace, 'even though the fig tree doesn't blossom, there's no fruit on the vines, the produce of the olive tree fails, there's no food in the fields, the flocks cut off from the fold, there's

no herd in the stalls. *Yet will I rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.'*

I read something that someone else wrote about this Book, Habakkuk which kind of sums it all up in a nutshell. Have a listen: "The underlying theme of this Book, Habakkuk, can be summarised as follows: a mature faith trusts humbly but persistently in God's design for establishing righteousness on the earth."

And you know something? That's the power of the change that Habakkuk experienced when he spoke with God and heard the Word of God amidst the calamity. He humbly accepted God's way. He trusted in the sovereign will of God and there in that place of humility, he found peace and he found joy – "*Yet will I rejoice in the Lord.*" Habakkuk 3:18. "*I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and he makes me tread upon the heights.*"

Even though everything else around him was failing, the Spirit of God enable this man to trust God, to rejoice in God, to rise up – God became his strength – God gave him the feet like the deer, God made him to tread upon the heights and that, my friend, that is what God would have for you and me - amidst all the calamities that life hurls at us as we receive His Word.

In Due Season

So as we head into the home-straight in this journey with Habakkuk – this four week series that I've called "How Long O Lord, How Long?" has it been a blessing to you? Well, it has for me! Probably one of the things that you don't think about is that I get to spend a whole bunch of time in God's Word preparing these programmes and that's an awesome thing because it's God's Word that changes us – it's like food. We wouldn't think of going day after day after day without food unless we absolutely had to; unless we had no choice in the matter.

And yet so often, people who believe in Jesus go day after day after day after day without feasting on the Bread of Life; the Word of God; Jesus Himself. And they wonder why they feel empty inside; they wonder why they feel weak and helpless because that's what happens when you go without food – physical food or spiritual food.

And what God's been doing in me as I have spent time pouring of this very short Book of Habakkuk – just a few pages – is making me strong; He's been feeding me with His Word and making His perspective; His heavenly view, my perspective; my view. That's

what it's all about – seeing things through the eyes of the One who sees everything.

I want to finish off this series with a word for those who are still sitting there, thinking to themselves 'Well, I've heard everything this guy said; I've heard everything he's read from the Bible; from God's Word. I've heard it all but deep down in my heart I'm still wondering how long, O God, how long?

That question can be a persistent, nagging thing that seems not to want to go away because there is some injustice or some hurt or some violence or some ... some trial that seems to go on and on and on and on and for some reason God just doesn't do anything about it.

And so I just feel I need to speak one more thing into that place if that's where you happen to be right now. It comes from Peter the Apostle. It was written centuries after Habakkuk. Jesus has been, died, raised again and ascended into heaven and Peter is writing to the persecuted church in the first century AD.

Man, were they being persecuted! They were going through stuff like being tarred and feathered and set alight and tortured because of their faith. How must those people have been wondering, 'How long O God, how long?'

This is what I love about God's Word the Bible – it's written for real people in real situations, going through real stuff. Here it is – the Letter from Peter – First Peter chapter 5, beginning at verse 6. It says:

"Humble yourselves therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves – keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.

Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in the world are all undergoing the same kinds of sufferings. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you."

"Humble yourselves under the mighty ... mighty hand of God and he will exalt you in due time". In what time? In your time? In my time? No, no, in His time – in due time. That's why you and I can

cast all our anxiety on Him because He cares for us. Because He will restore, support, strengthen, and establish us. And yes, the enemy, the devil, is waiting, is prowling like a roaring lion waiting to devour someone; waiting for someone to lose heart; waiting for someone to give up. But resist him - just hang in there with Jesus. Don't give up!

You and I, we aren't the only ones that are suffering here. Lots of people are suffering but *"after you have suffered for a little while,"* writes Peter in chapter 5, verse 10, *"the God of all grace who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will (now listen to this) ... will himself restore, support, strengthen and establish you."*

Don't you love that? After we've suffered for a little while, this amazing God of all grace, who has this eternal plan that He has called us to, and listen to how Peter emphasises this, this God who has called us to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore and support and strengthen and establish.

Come on; is that good news or what? God Himself will restore and support and strengthen and establish us and today, this very moment, He's doing just that. His eternal plan is rolling on and you and I, we can rest in His sovereign grace, just like Habakkuk.

And when we do that ... when we open our heart to His Word which is so powerful, so mighty, so eternal that it will stand forever – when we open our hearts to His Word, His Spirit will bring healing to our hearts – His Spirit will bring joy and peace to our hearts. His Spirit will put His praises on our lips. His Spirit will enable us to say what Habakkuk said:

*"Even though the fig tree doesn't blossom and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet will I rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation.
God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and he makes me tread upon the heights."*

Hallelujah, thank You Jesus.