

# Who God Really Is

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Date: 18 June 2023

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] If you have been reading or been listening to the book of Habakkuk, I wonder if you would have guessed that this book would end with the sound of singing. We started this series a couple of weeks ago with some lines from some hymns. I said they could well have come at the end of this book. When darkness veils his lovely face, I rest on his unchanging grace. Through every high and stormy gale, my anchor holds within the veil. Now, of course, those words don't come at the end of this book, but we do get a very similar sounding hymn. One final prayer in this book of prayers, verse 1, a prayer of Habakkuk the prophet, but unlike his first two prayers, this prayer, Luke, is for singing. Verse 19, see that, for the director of music on stringed instruments. Now, I tried to find some version of this chapter that we could sing tonight. I didn't succeed. Maybe you know of someone who has set this to music for the church to sing. Maybe some of you here tonight could do that, some of you musically minded. I know there are some of you out there who could put these words into song for us to sing, because these words are words that we do need to learn to sing as Christians. They are words for the Christian life, words that need to get under our skin and into our hearts in song. Why is there a song at the end of this really heavy book? Well, because while we see Habakkuk still doesn't have all the answers, God has shown him who he is. It's when he catches sight, the prophet of God, through the darkness, his lovely face, that Habakkuk's heart begins to sing again. He'd heard what God was doing and couldn't reconcile it with the God who he knew. He has doubted God's ways. He's questioned God's wisdom.

But through his prayers, God has taken who he is and what he is doing and has brought them back together in Habakkuk's heart and given him a much bigger, a much clearer vision of himself than when he started. So that by the end of this book, we find the prophet singing in the storm, singing praise to God in the face of opposition, singing prayers to God in the face of dark circumstances. And I want us to recognize at the start that that isn't because anything really has changed in his life. In so many ways, nothing has changed. His circumstances are still what they were at the beginning of the book. In fact, we might even say that they are worse than they were at the beginning of the book. But in a very, very important way, everything has changed, hasn't it?

Everything has changed because his faith now has a hold on God that he didn't have at the start. One Bible teacher, David Helm, really helpfully sums up the book of Habakkuk in three words, theocracy, theodicy, and theophany. If you want to sound clever when people ask you what the book of Habakkuk is about, you can remember that. I've found them really helpful as I've carved up this book.

I wanted to share them with you tonight. Theocracy, we've seen that, haven't we? God's rule and reign that Habakkuk has questioned. Is God really in charge? Theodicy, God's purpose and providence in suffering and pain that Habakkuk struggled with. God, why are you doing this? But finally, we come to land tonight on theophany, God's revealing himself personally to be known, that Habakkuk finally comes to rest and to rejoice in. Theocracy, theodicy, theophany. And it says we come to rest in the revelation of God's character at the end of this book, that there are three lessons that leads for us, three things in this prayer that teach us how to rejoice in God in troubled times. Firstly, then, pray because the Lord is merciful to save. This chapter is titled, A Prayer of Habakkuk, the prophet, in verse one. It's worth noting in passing, I think, that Habakkuk has not stopped praying in this book, has he? He started with a prayer, beginning, middle, and end. A prayer, a prayer, another prayer. And there's a really simple, straight-off-the-page lesson for us there, isn't it? That the faith of those counted righteous in God's sight is a prayerful, a praying faith, a watching, waiting, praying faith. Now, this prayer is important at the end because finally he can see who God is, but he's not stopped praying, has he, simply because God has settled his heart.

[ 5 : 12 ] He goes on praying and praising God. I wonder, when we pray and we see God at work in our lives, in our church, in our world, I wonder, do we then stop praying? It's a strange thing to do, isn't it?

But we do do it, don't we? We put in our request for something that we want. God gives it to us. We thank him and carry on. We bring our troubles to God, our sorrows, our cares. He settles our hearts.

He gives us peace, and we stop talking to him about it. God answers Habakkuk's prayers, and Habakkuk prays his longest, richest, warmest prayer yet. See, faith that perseveres through anything is faith that prays at all times. Let's see then how this final prayer begins in verse 2.

Look, Lord, I've heard of your fame. I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. There's that reverent trust that we ended with last time. He is silent, isn't he, before the God whose ways are so much higher than his own ways. Okay, he's using words, but what he's really saying, isn't it, is that he is speechless. He stands, and he is in awe, and not only of God as God, but the Lord, that's his name there, Yahweh, twice. So that what overwhelms Habakkuk is the thought that the God whose glory will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea, and the God whose justice will put right every wrong, that that great God of time and space and history is the God who he knows by name.

This great God is his God. I imagine it's a bit like what maybe growing up in the White House would be like, and the day when it dawns on you that the man you call daddy is in fact the president.

[ 7 : 07 ] We'll multiply that by infinity, and you get to where Habakkuk is at the start of this prayer, that Yahweh, my God, my Savior, well, now your great fame, your majesty, your power has dawned on me.

And it's as he thinks on who this God is, what he has done in the past, that he is in awe of him, and he praised for God to do it again. See that? Repeat your deeds in our day. In our time, make them known. In wrath, remember mercy. Now, he's looking back, isn't he, in so much of this prayer, the deeds that he has in mind, he wants God to repeat. And we'll come to the rest of the prayer in a few moments, but just for now, it's important to know that those things that he wants God to do again are exodus things. So this prayer, it's descriptions, it's a stylized retelling of God's great rescue of his people from the world superpower at the time, Egypt. And so his prayer is for God to save his people again from the world superpower of their day, Babylon. Do it again, God. Do the exodus thing. Come in power. Come to save and to deliver. But there is a difference.

He notices that because for God to do that again in their day, God would need to do what? In wrath, remember mercy. Why? Because, well, remember the Babylonians Habakkuk wants to be saved from were sent by God to punish the sins of his people. And so for God to save them, he would need to show mercy. Really interesting, isn't it? That in a book devoted to a prophet's search for justice, that by the end he has stumbled on his need for mercy. What's the difference? Well, if justice is getting what we deserve, then mercy is not getting what we deserve. We ended last time with God in his holy temple and all the earth in silence before him. Habakkuk has learned that in an ultimate sense, there are no goodies and baddies, that the line that separates good and evil runs through every human heart so that when we stand before the judgment seat of God, we have nothing to say in our own defense.

And so he recognizes, doesn't he, the legitimacy of God's wrath. God, you have every right to be angry. We have trampled on your word. We have loved what you have hated. We have hated what you have loved.

And so see the problem at the end of this book with longing for justice only, because it's not justice that sorts out the wrong in us, is it? Only grace does that.

[ 10 : 05 ] That's what our world has missed in its rush to punish and to silence what it sees as wrong, and its cry for justice. I wonder, in our desire for justice, have we recognized yet our need for grace? We all want justice, don't we? But it's not God's justice that saves us from his wrath, it is his mercy. I wonder, have you reached where Habakkuk is tonight? In your just wrath against sin and evil, oh Lord, remember mercy. Be merciful to us sinners. Now, how do we hold those two things together?

I said justice is getting what we deserve, mercy is not getting what we deserve. How can both of those things be true at once? I guess for much of the Old Testament, those things are left hanging.

But here is the God whose deeds we have seen. What has God done for us in time? Paul writes in Romans 3, that God presented Christ as a propitiation. That is a sacrifice that satisfies his wrath through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate, he says, his righteousness at the present time so as to be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. What is he saying? That God put forward his own son so that his justice might fall on him for our wrongdoing and his mercy, his grace might instead fall on us for his death in our place.

Now, of course, that hasn't happened yet in the book of Habakkuk, but it is where God's justice and mercy meet in the story of Scripture. And so Habakkuk's prayer in wrath, remember mercy, it cries out, doesn't it, for Christ. God's people were looking down the fully loaded barrel of God's wrath as a nation that was greedy as death was coming their way on God's command. And Habakkuk prays to the God of mercy to save them from that punishment. Now, back then, God was merciful. He spared a remnant of his people to later return and to rebuild his kingdom again. But know this, brothers and sisters, friends, that God will spare us tonight when we call upon his name and we cry out to him for mercy. And to pray, Lord, in wrath, remember mercy. Perhaps you need to pray that for yourself tonight.

Have you recognized the legitimacy of God's wrath against your wrong? Have you asked him to show you mercy for Christ's sake? It is that simple. But like Habakkuk, he is not praying only for himself, isn't he, but for God's church, for a nation turned against him. And we can pray that prayer too. In fact, we have this evening, haven't we? Norman led us in prayer for a church turned against God. In wrath, remember mercy. We can pray that for our nation. Remember mercy. Lord, give us the gospel again.

[ 13 : 39 ] Show us Christ afresh. Lord, save us again as you have in the past, for you are a merciful God. That's lesson number one. We pray to a God who is merciful to save. And the second thing this prayer teaches us is to praise God in all circumstances, because he is mighty to save. Now, I said verses three to 15 give us a kind of stylized portrait of the Exodus. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, if you've ever seen a kind of Andy Warhol painting, do you know what I mean? Anything kind of pop art?

You know, it's a kind of a representation of whoever it is, the queen or whoever, but in kind of neon colors, and it kind of shouts at you. And it's bigger than life, isn't it? It's a stylized portrait.

In the same way Habakkuk is describing the Exodus rescue, but in bright colors and magnified to highlight just how powerful this God was and is to save. Now, where do we see the Exodus in this?

Well, just notice verse three, Timan and Mount Paran, they are in the region of Mount Sinai. That is where God came from. He met Moses there, he revealed himself by name, and then came to rescue his people. It also talks about a watery rescue, as if he took out his rage on the sea, verse eight, or verse 10, the deep road lifted its waves on high. Verse 15, you trampled the sea with your horses, churning the great waters. Very similar to what we sang in Psalm 77 together. It's a picture of God, the warrior king, striding through the water, taming it, parting it to rescue his people, going to war for his people, and bringing them back through water. But perhaps the biggest giveaway is verse 13. You came out to deliver your people to save your anointed one. You crushed the leader of the land of wickedness. You stripped him from head to foot. Now, in Israel's history up to this point, there really is only one land of wickedness, and only one great victory of God in saving his people.

And in fact, verses 14 and 15 seem to describe the way that Pharaoh's army charged down to reclaim their slaves, to take them back, only for God to turn their own strength against them, close the waters back over them so that they drowned. Now, there's lots here. We might wonder where hills collapsing, or the sun and moon stopping, and the sky kind of fit into it.

[ 16 : 28 ] God evidently doesn't have horses or arrows or a spear, but it is there, as I say, to convey in bright, bold colors, shouting colors, exactly what kind of God this is, that he is a God of infinite and invincible and unstoppable power, who the ancient mountains crumble before him in his presence.

The sun and moon stand still in the sky to witness his coming in power, who even tames the sea and obeys his voice. Where have we seen the sea, the water so far in this book? Remember the sea, the unruly sea, the chaotic sea, that Babylon trawls a net through and drags up the nations? Well, here is God the Lord, who is even Lord over the raging sea. Remember Babylon felt like an unstoppable power sweeping through the earth. Well, this is what invincible power really looks like.

Here is God in all his majesty. He has gone to war before for his people, says Habakkuk. We've seen it, and it was glorious. His glory covered the heavens. His praise filled the earth.

His splendor was like the sunrise. And now we understand, don't we, why he is singing this, rather than just praying it or even preaching it. Did we feel something of the compelling power of our God as we sang from Psalm 77 together? His lightning flashed from his hand. He strode through the sea. The poetry of the sea. The poetry of this song is here to stir in us that same awe that Habakkuk felt in the presence of God. See, here is a God who is not only unbelievably merciful to save, but who is unbelievably mighty to save. Just look at what hearing of this power does to Habakkuk in verse 16. I heard, and my heart pounded. My lips quivered at the sound. Decay crept into my bones, and my legs trembled. You wonder, when was the last time you thought of God and trembled? Is your God this big?

Is he this mighty, this awesome in power? Is your God invincible? And not only invincible, but powerful, invincible in his salvation. See, that's why it was so important for us to see the exodus here, because the point is not simply that God is very powerful, but that he is very, very powerful to save. That is how God uses his power for the salvation of his people.

[ 19 : 21 ] Now, where do we go to see such a powerful rescue of that as Christians today? He is looking back, isn't he, to the exodus. Where do we look to see God's power? Well, it shouldn't surprise us to find that it is on the cross. On the cross, it is not only God's mercy that is writ large, but his might. The sun went dark, the earth shook, and Christ went to war for his people.

Listen to Paul in Colossians chapter 2. Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Now, we might wonder, how can the Savior who hung on the cross be the same God that Habakkuk is describing in this chapter? Well, think about it this way. If it takes immense power to win wars with weapons and horses and tanks, how much more power does it take to win a war when nailed to a cross?

And how much more power still to turn the cross itself, the ultimate tool of humiliation, into the instrument of your victory? You have verses 14 and 13. Have they ever been more true than on the cross? When God came to deliver his people, he crushed the leader of the land of wickedness.

He stripped and humiliated him. He pierced his head with his own spear, hung him on his own gallows, we would say. But at the very point when his warriors stormed down to scatter us and devour us, wretched beings hiding in fear, is this not what Christ did? Not in the physical realm for a temporary rescue, but in the spiritual realm to win us an eternal salvation. Christ's power, was seen in his utter weakness, yet he won for his people a far more glorious victory even than the exodus. Our slavery to darkness and to sin was broken on the cross. On that day, Christ put the end of evil and darkness in the diary of world history. And so, brothers and sisters, let us praise our Lord, who is mighty to save, mighty to save. We might not always feel like praising Jesus when we are overwhelmed with our weakness, overwhelmed by difficulty, the pain in our lives. But like Habakkuk, when we see the Lord in all of his majesty and grace and power, well, let us look back to the victory that he has won for us in the past. And let us sing praise to him, even when our circumstances here and now haven't changed. And we look back, we tell the story again, we sing again. That's why it's so important that we sing together, isn't it? To stir in our hearts, to remind one another, to stir up in each other. A sense of awe at what Christ has done for us. When we tell each other again how he won the war for our souls, for our cosmos, by his power, well, it reminds us, doesn't it, that for all the wrong that is still in the world, for all the wrong that is still in us, that this is merely the cleanup operation of a war that has already been won. God is mighty to save, so praise him for his power and his rescue of us from sin and darkness and death. And the final and the perhaps most important lesson for us tonight and in this book is to trust because the sovereign Lord is our savior. Habakkuk ends with faith that God in his mercy and power will bring everything wrong to the right conclusion, even though he can't see it yet. So this is verses 17 to 19. I'll read them again for us. Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the sheepfold and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God, my savior. And that faith in God to be our savior, despite what we see around us, is characterized by two things here. Firstly, we trust patiently in him. Patiently, that is verse 16. Yet he says,

[ 24 : 27 ] I will wait patiently. Now this is something we've seen throughout Habakkuk, that true faith is faith that waits for God. Remember that image of Habakkuk on the watchtower, his eyes fixed on the horizon, waiting for God to show up. That in lots of ways is a picture of the Christian life. Our God is a big God who does things in his own time, not on our schedule. And he does not have to inform us when to expect him. Through prayer, Habakkuk has learned that lesson, hasn't he? And why does he need to be patient? Well, just look what's going on in verse 17, what's going on in this world. It is a wasteland.

There's nothing growing on the trees. There are no animals in the fields. This is a nightmare for the people of that day who relied on food from the land, isn't it? Now, if that was the basis of what he thought God was capable of doing, he wouldn't be hanging around waiting to see what God would do.

But what he sees here and now clearly isn't the basis of what he believes. Because, of course, the word that I didn't say or that perhaps we missed in those verses was the word though.

Though. There's nothing growing on the trees. There are no animals in the field. Well, though, there's nothing growing on the trees. And though there are no animals in the fields, in spite of that, notwithstanding this, I will wait patiently. It's in the face of utter emptiness that Habakkuk is waiting for God to judge and to save. And he therefore has to trust patiently through the darkness and through the emptiness that God will do what he says he will do. Indeed, a faith that says, because I can't see it, I won't believe it, isn't really faith, is it? But the righteous shall live by faith. I guess to bring this up to date for us, what do we see in our world today that convinces us that Christ will return? What do we see in our world that convinces us that Christ will return? Do the figs only grow on the trees of the righteous? Do good things only come to

Christians? We look and what do we see? We see emptiness, loss, hurt, pain, darkness. There is nothing in our world that convinces us that Christ is going to return, is there? And so it is in the face of what we see then that we must wait patiently for him to do so. Brothers and sisters, are you waiting well for God to judge and to save in mercy and in power? Are we standing on the watchtower with our eyes fixed on the horizon tonight? Or have we perhaps given up waiting and fallen asleep on our watch?

[ 27 : 32 ] Is our trust a patient trust, a watching, waiting, patient faith? The Christian faith is a patient faith, but it is also, finally, a joyful faith. Secondly, we trust joyfully in him. This is verse 18.

Though nothing's growing and all the animals are dead, he says, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior. We wait, but lest we think that the Christian life was simply gritting our teeth and holding on tight, Habakkuk says it is also a joyful wait. Because what brings him joy, it's not the grapes, is it, and the figs. What brings him joy is not the animals in the stall, not what, but who? The Lord himself. God his Savior gives him joy because he is both a merciful God and mighty to save past, present, and future. Well, Habakkuk has resolved that his circumstances won't dictate the attitude of his heart. See that? He will be joyful in the Lord in the face of his circumstances. Now, being joyful doesn't mean that he was happy all of the time. In fact, in verse 16, you could say he was falling apart. I think if you'd have asked Habakkuk if he was okay, he would have said no. But it helps us to see that faith isn't the same as feeling that everything will be fine. He doesn't let his feelings dictate how he responds. He trusts that God will do what is right, and he rejoices in that. And his joy was proved right in history. Calamity did come on the nation that was invading them. Babylon would fall to the Persians that would then fall to the Medes, and 70 years later, God's people would be rescued back into the land. Now, we know that because Christ hasn't returned yet, that that wasn't ultimate justice. Ultimate justice has not yet been done.

Not all wrong is paid for and set right. It's unlikely, in fact, that Habakkuk lived to see the overthrow of Babylon. And no doubt, even if he had, he would still have been upset by the scale of destruction and the wrong that was being done. But it is a little reminder, isn't it? A little reminder that our faith is not the same as our feelings. I think it's easy for us today, especially maybe young Christians, to confuse the two. Our culture is so impulsive and so feelings-driven, and our world tells us that how we feel is the ultimate guide to how things really are, are feelings that you shouldn't be argued against. And our feelings are not wrong in and of themselves, but they are not God. And knowing who God is, really, and what he has really done, well, that trumps how we feel about the world, doesn't it? We can rejoice in him, even when we feel we are coming undone like the prophet. It's great, isn't it, when our feelings line up with our faith. We love that. It's good, but they don't always. And in those times, we need to ground our trust in God, our Savior, verse 18, rather than our circumstances. And that, ironically, is where we do find real and lasting joy, joy that can't be touched by our circumstances, joy that can't be taken away from us by our pain, because it is tethered to God, our Savior, who is merciful and mighty. We trust patiently and joyfully. And the book of Habakkuk ends, then, with a picture of a prophet standing in a precarious place, but made strong by the Lord. Perhaps you've seen those videos of mountain goats kind of skipping up the craggy cliffs, or kind of standing precariously on a shelf of rock just a couple of inches wide. Well, that is the picture we're left with at the end of this book. That is what the Lord has done for this prophet, and that I hope he has done for us. He has not changed the environment or the situation, but he has given us strength to stand where we couldn't stand where we couldn't stand before. He has given us spiritual resilience, trust in the face of our circumstances. He has given us joy, reason to sing in the midst of a world of darkness and pain and difficulty. He has done that, hasn't he, through Habakkuk's prayers. And my prayer is that verses 17 to 19 become our song and our prayer for the Christian life.

So let's pray that together now for one another. Let's pray. Amen. God, our Savior, how we praise you and we rejoice in you that you are merciful to save.

That in your wrath you have remembered mercy, Lord, that you have poured out your wrath upon your Son, and you have spared us. And not only that, but you are mighty, Lord, to break the power of our sin.

[ 33 : 18 ] We thank you, Lord, that you are just and gracious. And we pray, Lord, that you would help us to rejoice in you at all times. Lord, help us to be a prayerful people.

And help us, Lord, to be a people who are quick to praise you. And Father, we pray, help us to be those who trust in you deeply. Father, we ask, not expecting that you will overturn, Lord, our every difficulty, though we know that you can, but rather, Lord, that you would give us strength to endure, that you would deepen our faith in you, that you would give us joy in troubled times.

Lord, give us strength, we ask, to stand in precarious places, because our faith is in you, our Savior. Lord, be our strength, we pray, in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.