

From why to worship

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Date: 24 October 2021

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[0 : 00] Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are a God who speaks, you are a God who reveals yourself, and your word is effective.

And so we ask one more time, Lord, that you would speak this morning, you would reveal yourself, and that your word indeed would be effective as we receive it with faith.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. What does it feel like to receive news of impending calamity? Perhaps you're at a hospital for a routine check-up, and then your doctor suddenly calls you in for a private chat, all serious and sober.

And that dreaded C word comes up, I'm sorry you have cancer. And the prognosis is bad, you could be dead within a year. Or you're at work and your boss asks you to come in and see him, and then he drops the news.

Perhaps you're going to be let go in a month's time. And this at a time when the job market is tough. Or you open the news website, only to be told that despite the high vaccination rate, the coronavirus has a high chance of mutating into an even more dangerous variant, and so life in the future is looking grim.

[1 : 13] Oh, and by the way, did you know that anti-Christian legislation that looked like it had no hope of passing is now getting the support of your favourite legislator? Bad news is like a sucker punch, isn't it?

Especially when you're not expecting it. Your heart beats faster, your mind starts to shut down, you feel shock and fear. Welcome again to Habakkuk's world.

When we began our journey with him, we didn't know anything about him. But we soon realised he was like us. His world was one like us, marked by injustice and conflict.

And he had the same questions as us. God, what are you doing about injustice? Why aren't you doing anything about it? But if he was expecting some soothing words, he didn't get it.

Because God answered him with some unexpected bad news. I am doing something about it, God declares. I am raising the Babylonians to come and deal with my unfaithful people in Judah.

[2 : 16] And that comes like a sucker punch to Habakkuk. From, why God are you not doing anything? Habakkuk now asks, why God are you doing this?

He's in shock. This can't be right. And God says, that's right. Don't think for a moment that the Babylonians themselves are going to be let off the hook.

That's not how I work. Woe is indeed coming for them too. Just not now. Only at the end. That's the only timetable you need to know, Habakkuk.

That's what we saw last week. So yes, judgment is coming for both Judah and Babylon, for Jew and Gentile alike. My just ways will ultimately be seen, God says, as I call to account those who have not done what is right.

But that still doesn't sound like good news. After all, that means that we still have to live in the present time with all its injustice, with all its mess.

[3 : 18] We still have to live with bad politicians, bad bosses and bad teachers. We still have to live with flawed processes and unfair outcomes. We have to wait.

And we have no idea when it will all end. Habakkuk chapters 1 and 2 sure sound like a clear recipe for a nervous breakdown.

How can anyone cope with such uncertainty? Except, when we turn to Habakkuk chapter 3, we find something surprising.

We don't find anything resembling a nervous breakdown for the prophet. We don't find him raging and shaking his fists against God. Indeed, we don't even find a single question in Habakkuk 3.

Instead, we find poetry. Indeed, we find even beauty. For right there, near the end of this chapter, we discover some of the most beautiful words recorded in the Old Testament.

[4 : 19] 3 verse 17. Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines. Though the olive crop fail, and the fields produce no food.

Though there are no sheep in the pen, and no cattle in the spores. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God, my Saviour. And so by the end of Habakkuk 3, at the end of his conversations with God, we find peace.

We find joy. We find an assurance that's incredibly attractive to us. We find a prophet who has moved from why to worship. Notice that at the end of 3 verse 16, the prophet is waiting.

Yet I will wait patiently for the day of calamity to come on the nation invading us. And so he's doing precisely what God told him to do, back in 2 verse 3.

Though it lingers, wait for it, God said. And in other words, Habakkuk is doing what God said a righteous person should do, last week. And that is to live by faith.

[5 : 28] Live by faithfulness. He has asked God his questions, and God has spoken. And when God speaks, you have two options. Either you listen, or you don't.

Either you accept it, or you don't. There's no other way around it. And so he accepts God's word, all the while trusting that even in the midst of God's just judgment, he will still save.

That's made clear in 3 verse 18, when God is referred to as his saviour. And so Habakkuk has made his choice. He will live by faith.

The question then is, how do we make the same journey as Habakkuk? How can we live by faith? How can we move from why to worship? And that's where Habakkuk 3 comes in.

Notice 3 verse 1, that this entire chapter is a prayer. But like the rest of this book, it's not meant to be a private conversation. We're meant to eavesdrop in. Because notice something else about Habakkuk 3.

[6 : 34] At the very end of the chapter, we discover that this prayer has been set to music. And so it's like a psalm. Indeed, in 3 verse 1, we find this rather enigmatic phrase, on Shigionov.

We're not sure what it means, but given that it's also found in the heading of Psalm 7, it's probably a musical term of some sort. And so clearly this prayer has not remained private, but was being used in formal worship services.

It's meant to be a model, a prayer we can use and learn from. So then, in a world where bad news and calamity seems like it won't end anytime soon, how can we live by faith?

Well, let's learn from this prayer. And really, this prayer has just one big lesson for us today. And it's this. Call to mind who God is.

Call to mind who God is. That's the one thing Habakkuk wants us to know today. All throughout this book so far, Habakkuk has been arguing with God.

[7 : 42] And we said there's nothing wrong with that, for if we're arguing and wrestling with God, that means we haven't abandoned Him. We haven't withdrawn from Him. And God welcomes that. There is nothing too massive, nothing too complicated, nothing too painful for God to deal with.

He welcomes our questions. He's patient with our confusion. He's okay with our bewilderment. But, it would be sad within it if the only time you talk to your loved ones was when you questioned and debated them.

And so, it would be sad if that's all our conversations with God consisted of. And so, Habakkuk knows it's time to stop being the interrogator. Instead, it's time to simply be the listener and the observer.

In verse 2, we discover He has heard and He has seen. For He closes His eyes and in His mind's eye, He considers God's fame and God's deeds by going back to the Exodus.

Why? Because in the Old Testament, God's fame and renown is often linked with that momentous historical event. Now, here's Joshua 9 verse 9, for example, on the screen.

[8 : 58] They answered, Your servants have come from a very distant country because of the fame of the Lord your God. For we have heard reports of Him or that He did in Egypt.

And so, notice that the acts of God in Egypt are linked with His fame. Or look at what Jeremiah says in 32 verse 20, You perform signs and wonders in Egypt and have continued them to this day in Israel and among all mankind and have gained the renown that is still yours.

So, same thing. And so, Habakkuk now retraces the journey God made with His people many years before so that he can see God in action and remember what it's like.

In his mind's eye, he sees God bringing His people out of slavery in Egypt and to Mount Sinai where God revealed Himself to them in fire and smoke and thunder and lightning.

And in verse 3, Habakkuk pictures God as now emerging from Mount Sinai leading His people marching onto the promised land.

[10:09] That's why he talks about Taman and Mount Paran in verse 3. For those are the locations in the south where Israel stopped by after they left Sinai.

And, if you're God's enemies camping out in the promised land, well, that's exactly the direction you'll be looking towards with great fear and trepidation because you know that's where the God of Israel is coming from.

Why fear and trepidation? Because the God of Israel, the God who just defeated the powerful Egyptians, is not just another village God but the creator of heaven and earth.

After all, was He not the one who could unleash the forces of nature whether that was turning the river into blood or sending a hailstorm against Egypt? And that's why verse 3 again, there is no part of this universe that is not covered with His glory.

No part that does not cry out in praise to Him for all creation comes under His palm. In verse 4, God's splendor shines as bright as the sunrise with rays flashing from His hand dazzling in all His brilliance.

[11:22] Perhaps Habakkuk is remembering God's revelation on Mount Sinai where the light of His glory was so radiant that none of His people could take it. But you know what?

Even then, God hasn't even started to turn the brightness setting up to full. For, end of verse 4, even then, His power is hidden.

It is veiled from us to protect us. That's how glorious God is, how strong He is, how brilliant He is to make Himself known to us, to be seen by us.

He has to veil Himself. And even then, we can hardly take it. Well, that's who the God of Habakkuk is. That's who our God is.

And He's on the march. And this God is certainly not to be trifled with because, verse 5, look who else is under His command. Plague went before Him.

[12:23] Pestilence followed His footsteps. These are His agents of judgment, the very things that He used to bring judgment on Egypt. Now, during that time, some saw plagues and pestilences almost like independent gods needing to be placated by worship and sacrifice.

But God makes clear here that they come under His control. Even coronaviruses cannot have independent existence without God's permission and deployment.

And when God comes, the nations like Kushan and Midian tremble, verses 6 and 7. You know, even the things that look like they last forever. Ancient mountains, H.O. hills, well, they cannot stand in the presence of this powerful, eternal God.

As He comes, as He marches, there is nothing you can do to stop Him from accomplishing what He wants. And so, what Habakkuk is doing here is calling to mind who God is by remembering what God has done.

It's like he's looking at a video of the Exodus journeys. But he's not watching it like someone watching a random YouTube travel video for fun.

[13:43] No, he's watching it like a child watching a video of a precious road trip with his father, imagining again that he's there, reliving those events, immersing himself by walking alongside God in his victory march.

And as he walks with God, he cannot but be awed again, once again, by the majesty and the power of God. But why is Habakkuk reliving this?

Why does he bother to remember events of the past? Is he simply indulging in nostalgia? No, because as the theologian Miroslav Vov points out, we always do something with our remembering. Remembering is not merely recalling some information in the past. Rather, remembering also helps us to process our present. Think, for example, of a little girl who's about to get an injection.

As she looks at the syringe that the doctor is holding, terrified, her mother says to her, remember last year when you also got an injection from Dr. Ng?

[15:06] It was just a little pinprick over in a few seconds. And remember how gentle Dr. Ng was? You have nothing to be scared of. And so, the mother is encouraging her daughter to call to mind a memory of the past to strengthen her for the present challenge.

And so, as Habakkuk calls to mind who God is and what he has done, he is being strengthened for the present. For he's remembering, this is my daddy.

And who he was then is who he always will be. The one who marches to bring his people into the promised land from slavery in Egypt is the one who can do so again.

Yes, the Babylonian invasion will come to pass. Yes, the temple will be ransacked, the city burned to the ground. Yes, calamity is coming. But that is not the end.

For if God rescued once, he can rescue again. And so, this memory is transforming Habakkuk to face the present and indeed the future.

[16 : 22] As he calls to mind the God of the Exodus, this memory, as one commentator puts it, becomes the frame by which Habakkuk sees his own context and responds to his situation.

It becomes the ground of his hope. It's the basis of his faith. It's the reason why in light of impending calamity, he can still imagine a better future.

And that means this can become our frame as well. It can become the ground of our hope, the basis of our faith, and the reason why we can imagine a better future.

Now, this isn't Habakkuk practicing the power of positive thinking or denying reality and burying his head in the sand. No, that's not what faith is. As if it's simply pretending that things are better when they are not.

No, Habakkuk's faith and our faith is grounded in a truthful memory of a God who is mighty to save.

[17 : 33] And so, we must remember. We must call to mind who God is and what he has done. We must remember that God isn't merely someone like your prime minister or your big boss or your school principal.

He's not just someone who happens to be a little higher up on the hierarchy. Someone who just has a little bit more power than you. No, he's so much greater than that. In the Doctrine 1 class that I'm currently teaching, we've recently considered how unlike us God actually is.

That he's someone who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent. Now, what do those technical terms mean? Well, it means that his eyes run through and through throughout the whole earth and can see right into the deepest parts of your heart.

It means that he is not bound by time and cannot be measured by time and that time itself cannot wear him down the way it wears down human beings. It means that there is no force in the universe who can oppose or stone war him.

And this God, the Bible says, is the God who marshals his omnipotence, his omniscience, his omnipresence to redeem you. That's what we must remember.

[18 : 51] And we can remember because that's exactly why we gather every Sunday, to remember and rehearse the mighty deeds of God. And that's why it's so important to gather every Sunday, to do exactly that in our scripture readings or in the words of the songs that we sing or in the words of the creed we recite.

And that's why scripture asks us to take the Lord's Supper regularly, which God willing will finally be able to do in two weeks time. Because the Lord's Supper is no mindless ritual.

No, it does something to us. It conjures up a memory for us. It reminds us that we are sinners, saved by God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ.

And it reconfigures our identity. For it reminds us that in Christ, we are not yet home, we are presently pilgrims. But we have a guaranteed glorious home waiting for us.

And so the Lord's Supper is actually more than mere remembrance. It is actually a means of God's grace to us. It gets us looking at the past so that we are reminded of our future.

[20 : 08] And that keeps us going in the present. Do you want to live by faith the way Habakkuk does? Then don't skip church.

That's the best place to remember and rehash the mighty deeds of God. But let's come back to Habakkuk. And as he calls to mind who God is, he's reminded that God's deeds culminate in God's victory.

Look at some of the imagery in verses 8 to 15. Earlier on God has been marching but in verse 8 God has come and he now rides into battle as the divine warrior, riding his horse and his chariot with his bow and arrows, verse 9.

And as he comes, the waters themselves are split, the mountains trash about, and verse 11, even the sun and the moon pause their movements and stand still. As they did at one point when Joshua brought the people into the promised land.

But it is not the earth or the waters that God is acting against. No, in verse 12, it is the evil nations, those that act like Egypt, like Babylon, whom God is angry with.

[21 : 24] It is their violence and their oppression that grieves him. And so, he acts. You can't miss the force of the poetry. This is no tame God.

In verses 13 to 15, he is crushing the leader of the wicked, piercing his head, trampling the sea under his feet, recalling Exodus imagery all over again.

He is winning the victory. And he is doing all this in service of his people. He is doing this not because he is evil, but because he is good.

Look at verse 13. He is coming out to deliver your people to save your anointed one. And so, this is what Habakkuk caused to mind.

All around him, he sees evil triumphing, he sees sin winning, but as he gazes at God, he sees nothing but victory, even though he has received bad news of impending calamity.

[22 : 25] And that's how he is able to live by faith. And that's how we can live by faith too, as we gaze at God in the face of Jesus Christ.

For as we do so, we too see victory. Now, we need the eyes of the Holy Spirit to see this, because this victory comes in the image of defeat.

For to crush Satan underneath his feet, Jesus himself was crushed for us. That's not how you win battles, ordinarily speaking, but that is exactly how Jesus crushed the leader of wickedness, Satan himself, underneath his feet by going to the cross.

And, Colossians 2 verse 15 on the screen tells us, having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

And that triumph is confirmed by the resurrection as Jesus rises again to defeat the last enemy, death itself. And so, we can cry out like Habakkuk does in verse 13, you came out to deliver your people to save your anointed one.

[23 : 45] Once again, do you see how looking back at the past causes us to see our future? when we look back at the cross and resurrection, we see the guarantee of God's future victory, even amidst calamity.

victory is only imminent if you are on the right side.

You see, verses 8 to 15 is a rather awe-inspiring picture of God, is it not? That's what Habakkuk intends. This is a God whom you should fear. If you're Egypt, you should fear him.

If you're Babylon, you should fear him. And if you're like Judah in Habakkuk's day, who are like Egypt and Babylon rather than like a holy nation, then you should fear him too.

For God is going to act as this divine warrior with his bow and arrow against them as well. You see, God isn't someone whom you can just play with, someone whom you can mess around with.

[24 : 54] Even if you identify as one of God's people, if you are living unrepentantly in present sin, you cannot anticipate future salvation.

You're only inviting divine judgment. And that would be truly bad news, even worse than any present calamity that might be for you.

And so call to mind who God is. And don't call to mind your idea of God, but call to mind God as he truly is.

Because whatever your idea of God is, whatever ideas we conjure up in our minds, it is definitely smaller and skinnier than who the Bible portrays God to be.

And a small and skinny God will result in a faith that is also small and skinny, unable to bear the weight of whatever life throws at you. No, see God instead as this awesome, even fearsome God who can crush his enemies.

[25 : 59] See God as Habakkuk portrays him. And as the theologian David Wells reminds us, it is only when we recall the holiness of God that grace has any meaning at all.

Without the holiness of God, sin and grace both lose its meaning. Without the holiness of God, sin is just a mistake, not a deadly transgression against the king of the universe.

Without the holiness of God, grace is just God being nice to us, not a free, costly and undeserved gift of God to us when all we have entitled to is judgment.

But when we recover a vision of God as this triumphant, awe-inspiring, holy God, and realise that if we trust in Jesus, this God is for us, not against us, well, will that not be solid ground on which you can stand in the face of any calamity?

Will that not sustain your faith so that you might live by faith and worship this big, big God? It's a call to mind who goddess, behold him, look at him, and as you do so, you can move from why to worship.

[27 : 29] And as we do so, we find strength too to do two other things. Firstly, we can then call on God to act. That's exactly what Habakkuk does in verse 2.

Do you see what Habakkuk is doing here?

As he beholds God and his past acts, he is able to call on God to do a new work amongst his people. He's able to say to God, do it again.

Don't just be the God of the past, be God in the present. You made your power and compassion known in the exodus, Lord, well, make it known again today. Why not? You are still God today. My friends, is that how you pray today? Do you have the same longing today? Well, as I reflect on my own prayers, I have to admit, no.

[28 : 39] And I think that's because my own view of God has become too small. I need just as much to hear Habakkuk as you do. And I want to start praying again like Habakkuk.

What about you? You know, over the past year, we've become familiar with the phrase new normal. We can't go back to living like how it was like pre-pandemic.

We say we need to adjust to the new normal. normal. But what if that was also true in our spiritual lives? What if we prayed for us not to go back to our old normal, but to have a new normal?

One characterized by a deep thirst for God, a willingness to confess our sin, a desire to go the extra mile for our neighbor, a renewed zeal to go deeper into his word, a readiness to spend more time in prayer, a deep hunger to see God's glory be lifted up above all.

Why don't we start praying, repeat them in our day, do it again Lord, make your name known in coaching. Why don't we plead, God, in wrath, remember mercy.

[29 : 56] Let Habakkuk challenge you and I today. Let's start praying like that again. but that can only happen when we let the Bible shape our view of who God really is as this big, big God, not a small and skinny God.

Here's the second thing we can do when we move from Hawaii to worship. Secondly, we can call on his name with joy and confidence. We're back now in 3 verse 16 to 19.

But just before we read again those beautiful verses, I want you to notice two assumptions these verses make. Number one, these verses assume that even the righteous person can still feel afraid. Look at verse 16. 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. Faith and feelings of fear can coexist.

[31 : 13] You know, sometimes Habakkuk's journey is described as being from fear to faith, but I don't think that's quite right because I think he exhibits faith even back in chapter 1.

And because fear hasn't quite disappeared right here at the end, of the book, no, the righteous person can still feel afraid. Now, this is a journey from why to worship.

And number two, these verses assume that bad things can happen to righteous people. There is no gospel prosperity in verse 17. And indeed, the same perspective can be found in the New Testament.

You know, think of Romans 8.35, for example, where Paul writes, trouble, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword, separate us from the love of Christ.

In other words, Paul assumes that all these things, trouble, hardship, persecution, and so on, can happen to a Christian. But both Paul and Habakkuk ultimately end up in the same place.

[32 : 24] for Paul says in Romans, even if those things happen, I still have the love of Christ. Nothing can separate me from it.

And that's really the New Testament way of saying Habakkuk 3, verse 17 to 18. Though the fig tree does not bud, and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fail, and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen, and no cattle in the stores, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I'll be joyful in God, my Savior.

Why can Habakkuk say that? Why can Paul say that? Why can you and I say that? Because when we call to mind who God is, we must also call to mind things like Romans 8 32.

to know that this God did not spare his own son, but gave him out for us all, and how would he not also graciously give us all things?

When we call to mind who God is, we must call to mind Habakkuk 3, verse 13, that this is the God who came out to deliver your people to save your anointed one.

[33 : 50] And when that happens, we can move from how long Lord to even if Lord, even if the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fail and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stores, even if I have terminal cancer or a dead-end job with a bad boss or struggles with loneliness while everyone around me seems to have a life partner and a family or knowledge that society is moving in an anti-Christian direction, even if all this happens, yet I will rejoice in the Lord I will be joyful in God my Savior for he is mighty to save let's pray now to our

Lord Almighty Father, we stand in silence before you for you are the God whose glory covers the entire earth you are the God before whom we can say nothing yet thank you that you send the Lord Jesus to be our advocate who speaks on behalf of us and Father thank you that in his name we can approach your throne with fear and trembling and yet also with joy and confidence so we come before you now we repent of seeing you as a small and skinny God but we want to see you as this big big God the divine warrior who guarantees our victory and

Lord we pray Lord that in this time where we're in the midst of a pandemic that never seems to end when we're in the midst of impending calamity when some of us are facing or will face bad news Father please help us to ground our hope and our confidence in you lift our eyes to you to behold you as you really are and as we do that help us to find joy because you are God our savior you are the God who is true to your word the God who will bring us home to a place where trials will fade so please be with any of my brothers and sisters in particular who are struggling may this be a word of encouragement and exhortation to them all this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ Amen