

The Prophet and His Burden (Habakkuk 1:1-4)

Reading: Psalm 13

In the Old Testament you find that there are two categories of prophets.

There are the **Major Prophets** and there are the **Minor Prophets**.

Now those two definitions do not, in any way, define one as more important than the other...all they simply do is describe the length of them.

The longer prophets within the Old Testament are called the Major Prophets, the shorter prophets are described as the Minor Prophets.

The Major Prophets consist of the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, and even - some say - Lamentations.

Then there are twelve little books, mainly at the end of the Old Testament, and those twelve - including Habakkuk- are the minor prophets.

When you read through the book of Habakkuk is a bit like taking a time warp back some 2700 years into the Middle East.

Your first impression might be that he lived in a very different world. Technology, communication, and events were very different from today. Yet these are superficial impressions.

The more you listen to the prophet and to God's words in responding to him, the more it becomes clear that the human condition was much the same as it is now.

Our Western society is in spiralling moral decline.

The international stage is a mess...troubles in international affairs;
problems within economies;
financial meltdowns;
massive oil spills affecting life and livelihoods.
Tragedy after tragedy seems to plague our world.
Violence and chaos are the order of the day.

Social injustice, racism, and lawlessness continue to spread like wildfire.

The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

World hunger increases with each passing tick of the clock.

Unbridled hatred is roaming throughout the world like a mad dog.

With escalating concerns similar to ours...how does Habakkuk respond?

He responds by coming to God in prayer.

So let's begin our journey through the book of Habakkuk.

It is a unique book...one we should look on as Habakkuk's prayer diary...

with three prayers and two answers by God.

The first recorded prayer is found in these first 4 verses.

But the journal does not begin at the beginning.

It seems that the prophet has been praying about the matter on his heart for some time before this recorded prayer.

There is a bluntness in his protest... 'How long!'

Habakkuk was deeply disturbed with the national sins of his nation Judah.

He has been crying out to God for relief, but no deliverance came.

Have you experienced those annoying phone calls on your mobile phone...

Those calls where the conversation is only one way...

You can hear them talking, but your words are not getting through.

and you can hear the person on the other side saying, "Hello- Can you hear me"?

After a while, I just say, "Never mind- I'll talk to them later".

I think that this is a bit like Habakkuk felt when he was talking to God.

He had taken the matter before God, but no improvement seems to have happened.

It seems that God did not hear prayer, or refused to answer it.

So what starts as an appeal for God's salvation for his nation ends as a personal protest about God's inaction.

Verse 1, it simply reads: 'The oracle which Habakkuk the prophet received'.

The name Habakkuk is a form of the Hebrew word '**embrace**'.

The idea is of a wrestler in an embrace with his opponent.

The book is about a man who lived out his name by wrestling with God in prayer.

Habakkuk was who embraced God; he was one who held onto God.

Now we don't know much about Habakkuk.

We don't know who his family was,

we don't really know what tribe he was from,

we don't know where he was born, or where he lived –

we know absolutely nothing about him.

But we know this: following in his name he embraced and wrestled with God.

The other thing we know from this simple introduction is that this man Habakkuk carried a burden.

He had a burden because he was so close to God, because he held onto God.

The Hebrew word 'oracle' is the word 'massah'; 'burden'.

There are many words for burden, but this particular Hebrew word 'massah', means 'a load', something that has to be lifted from one place to another.

It's the Hebrew word that is used of the Levites when they carried the Ark of the Covenant, they bore a burden.

It also has the idea of carrying a burden of responsibility.

Habakkuk was burdened, because of the people's wickedness.

If you look through the book you see that there were social sins, there were religious sins, and there were political sins.

They had abusive leaders that filled their pockets with ill-gotten gain of the people, they robbed them, they extorted the poor.

Habakkuk is burdened by the injustice he sees in Judah and its capital Jerusalem.

The prophet lists injustice to the innocent and helpless:

The law is powerless.

Justice never prevails.

The wicked hem in the righteous.

Justice is perverted.

He is clearly in great distress (v2) and he is alarmed about the situation that confronts him.

His burden was also God's silence.

How can God sit idly by?

Is he at work or not?

What is God doing in the face of evil and suffering (Theodicy)

He looked, and he cried for God to come - deliver them, save them, judge them, do anything!

But there was silence from heaven.

He is actually accusing God of not listening to his cries!

As we read the prayer of Habakkuk we identify with his anguish.

Surely you can share Habakkuk's tension as he prayed.

You can sense his inner temptation to stop praying, because it has not effect.

We must pray on.

Our only help is in the name of the Lord who made the heavens and the earth.

Our hope for blessing must be fixed on him.

Remember this is only the opening entry in Habakkuk's prayer log.

It will end with prayers of confidence and triumph.
The sovereign Lord is my strength. (3:19)

How do we respond in difficult times?

From many pulpits we hear the message that we, as Christians, ought to seek here on earth a life of comfort, ease and prosperity.

Because we are told God promises calm seas on our voyage through life.

And indeed God's people ought to have expectations of comfort;

we ought to seek that comfortable journey.

But is this a true understanding of the Christian life?

Is not the reality that God does not promise his people calm seas,
but only that we reach port safely?

He does not promise us a wealthy, prosperous, easy, comfortable journey on this earth,
but he gives us his word that we shall arrive safely.

The truth is most of us will go through really tough times, and the question is, how will we respond to the ordeal?

A question we ought to raise is:

does Habakkuk have the right to question God in this way,
and is he justified in doing so?

And, by extension, do we ever have the right to ask God such things?

We need to be careful here: we may question God, but not sin.

We may be concerned about God's justice, but not sin.

Habakkuk's lament seems to be a cry of faith,

and in it he is trying to understand the character and work of God.

So Habakkuk is not condemning God with critical judgement,

but rather he is trying to discern God's ways.

Because God's ways are not our ways.

Have you ever struggled with the seeming inactivity of God in the face of adversity?

Have you ever asked questions similar to those of Habakkuk?

Have you ever complained about the direction of the world, the church or even your own life?

Have you ever wondered whether God is truly working in this broken world, or if he really cares?

Have you ever wondered why God would purpose that Christians should face sickness, injury, persecution, strife and hardship?

Why does God not convert my children?

Why? Why? Why?

Is he not our God?

Why does it appear that he is on the sidelines?
Why is he not working?

Living by what we see would seem to dull our view of the fact that God is sovereign and that he rules over all.

There was once a Greek philosopher named Epicurus.
He lived in the third century before Christ.

He had this idea that happiness should be defined as the absence of pain, and that life should be devoted to avoiding pain as the key to happiness.

And he looked at the world around him, like Habakkuk did three hundred years earlier, like people do today, and he saw pain.
He saw suffering everywhere.

And for Epicurus, this meant one thing.
There could be no all-powerful, loving God.

He challenged those who believed in an all-powerful, loving deity, asking them this question: “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not all-powerful. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent – evil. Is he both able and willing? Then how can there be evil?”

If you hang around atheists for any length of time, you’ll hear this argument.

Really, it is aimed right at Christians, right at the teachings of the Bible.
See, the Bible tells us that God is all-powerful.
The Bible tells us that God is loving.
So – why is there evil? Why doesn’t He do something?

That’s really the whole problem.
Habakkuk’s problem is the “problem of evil.”
How do we deal with the presence of evil and pain and suffering in this world?
What does that mean for our faith?

One way is to adjust your picture of God, to agree with Epicurus that God can’t be all-powerful and loving and permit evil at the same time.
The solution, then? Make God smaller.
He’s still loving, don’t worry.
But He’s not really all-powerful, you see.
He can’t stop all evil.

Habakkuk faced this problem of evil, too.

The very reason Habakkuk has a problem in the first place is because he is convinced God is all-powerful and loving.

Yes, evil isn't easy to explain in the universe of a sovereign God.
But in the day of evil, when sin comes to hurt and destroy, when pain and suffering fall, only a sovereign God can help.

The very attributes which seem to create the problem of evil – omnipotence and love – are the very ones we trust in most when we come to God in prayer.

The problem of evil is a blessing, in a way.
It calls us to God's promises and asks us to believe.

Habakkuk believed.

We know this, because he prayed.

And he kept praying when every earthly indication was that his faith was futile.

Yes, there's evil in the world. And it's hard to explain that.

And there's the choice.

Do we believe the Word of God?

When it says, God is all powerful;
when it says, God is loving and merciful;
when it says, God is just and right...

do we take God at His Word and trust Him?

Do we believe it?

Or do we form a god in our own image, one that doesn't offend us or make us uncomfortable?

Why believe the Bible?

The Bible doesn't avoid the hard questions.

It doesn't cover over the nasty reality of life in an evil world.

It doesn't pretend things are better than they are. The Bible is an honest book.

It shows the truth.

And even more than that...

the Bible gives us the ultimate answer to the problem of evil.

Only in the Bible do we find the Gospel.

Only in the pages of God's Word do we find the message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Habakkuk didn't know what we do now.

He had not yet seen his Saviour.

But he trusted in God's promise to set things right, to deal with sin.

For the prophet, this was still in the future.

All he had was a promise.
And when he saw nothing but evil that promise looked dim, and that's what drove him to prayer.
God, where are you? You promised to punish evil! You promised to save the righteous!
He cried out because he could not see salvation.

What a blessing we have!
What was still future for Habakkuk has been done and finished for us!

God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to deal with the problem of evil.

He lived a perfect life, to show that we can honour God in the midst of a sinful world.

He died a sinner's death, so that if we believe in him and trust in His work for our salvation, all of our sins – from first to last – are cleared away.

And he was raised from the dead, to show that death can't hold us!

No matter how terrible life may get, no matter even if the wicked take our lives, we have the promise of being raised again!

And, finally, as the ultimate answer to Habakkuk's question, we have the promise of a final reckoning.

The Apostles' Creed states that Jesus Christ "sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty – from there he shall come to judge the living and the dead."

God won't leave this world the way it is forever.
Judgment is coming – and all that evil and wickedness will be punished.
And on that day, every tear will be wiped from our eyes.
We shall not know fear or pain or war or grief anymore.

And that's the hope we can take from this passage.
God knows what we're facing.
He knows about the "problem of evil."
He knows we struggle to understand.

Here He gives us a picture of a man, a believer, an inspired prophet, who also struggled.

Remember, the book starts with a cry of anguish
but it ends with a hymn of praise!

Here he shows us hope – that by approaching God boldly, and persistently, like Habakkuk did, we – who know far more about God's plan than Habakkuk ever did! – can also be lifted out of despair and see the glory of God.