

Praise the Lord

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of August 2005.

The preacher is Robin McArdle. His sermon is entitled Praise the Lord and is based on Habakkuk 3.17-19.

Father, we thank you that before us we have your powerful word. Thank you that we have the ministry of your powerful spirit. I pray that each one of us tonight would be open to hear you speaking to us and that we would respond obediently to that word to us.

We ask this for Christ's sake. Amen. The year was 1983. The month was December.

And Brother Yun was travelling through the Henan province in mainland China. He was encouraging believers. And at that time he was arrested.

[1 : 1 1] As he was arrested he was hit with an electric baton. And literally hundreds of volts of electricity went through his body. Excruciating pain.

He was kicked with steel cap boots. And he was bashed with pistol handles. He was placed in a cell that had no heating.

And the outside temperature was below freezing. My guard confronted Brother Yun. Brother Yun. I'm your Lord. I'm your God.

If you kneel down before me I can release you immediately. And Brother Yun responded angrily. In the name of Jesus you are not my God.

You are just an earthly officer. My Lord is in heaven. I'm a heavenly man. Brother Yun. Brother Yun. Beaten.

[2 : 1 2] Battered. Tortured. I wonder whether we might be tempted to ask in such circumstances. Where are you God?

I mean. Why don't you save? Why don't you deliver? How do you think Brother Yun responded to God in those circumstances?

In the face of such brutality. In the face of such suffering. Try and put yourself in that situation.

In that position. Of Brother Yun. Well the Prophet Habakkuk knew a thing or two about a world with difficulties. Didn't he? As we've seen in recent weeks.

He lived under this Judean king Jehoiakim. Wickedness and evil reigned throughout the land of Judah. Amongst the people of God. In fact in 2 Kings 23 Jehoiakim is described by God as the one who did evil in the sight of the Lord.

[3 : 1 6] And you'll recall if you've been with us in recent weeks. That the book of Habakkuk. It opens with the Prophet pleading with God. To bring justice. To do something about the injustice and the violence and the wickedness throughout the land of Judah.

Of course rebellion against God never goes unpunished. Although I think it's clear that God's methods and God's timing sometimes confound us.

And you recall that the Lord informed Habakkuk. That indeed he was going to use the proud self-sufficient Babylonians.

To be his instruments of judgment. Against the wickedness. In Judah. And of course Habakkuk was stunned. And he struggled to get out of that valley of despair.

That we looked at in chapter 1. I mean God's being inconsistent. How could you use those wicked Babylonians to judge your own people? But you'll recall again if you've been with us in recent weeks.

[4 : 24] That indeed Habakkuk did get out of that valley of deep despair. Where he'd been worrying. And he went to the watchtower. And he went to the watchtower. And he watched. And he waited.

And he waited in the confidence that God would answer him. And that's exactly what God did. And you'll recall in chapter 2. That God told Habakkuk that he would judge the Babylonians.

The proud self-sufficient Babylonians. And it was against that background of judgment and sin. Through chapter 1 and chapter 2.

You'll recall we had those three great gospel promises. Remember the first one chapter 2 verse 4. The righteous will live by faith. And then verse 14.

One day the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. And then the chapter finishes with that great statement of God's sovereign. And the Lord is in his holy temple.

[5 : 22] And you'll recall then that Habakkuk's perspective improved, didn't it? And so as we came to chapter 3. We saw last week that Habakkuk was worshipping.

And he was witnessing. You see, the centre for Habakkuk. The focus of his thoughts was on the living God. And of course for those who were with us last week.

But maybe if you've just joined us this week. Let me say that chapter 3 is a song. In fact it's a prayer. But it's put in the way of a hymn. With verses of a song or stanzas.

And a chorus. And the song functions as the response to God's revelation to Habakkuk. And the first stanza of that great hymn.

In verses 1 to 15 of chapter 15. Chapter 3 verses 1 to 15. Describes the physical power of God's wrath manifest on the earth.

[6 : 17] And so Habakkuk saw that as he got up high enough. To get a great perspective of God's dealings. And then the second stanza clearly stated the reason for God's wrath.

Let me read to you again verses 12 and 13. And you might like to turn there as we start to go through our passage tonight. Page 764. In fury you trod the earth.

In anger you trampled nations. You came forth to save your people. To save your anointed. And then the third stanza. The last part. Concluding the song. Gave the reason for Yahweh's perseverance.

Personal intervention. So as we think about that song. Let's remind ourselves of that wonderful chorus. And again say that together. Chapter 3 verse 2.

Let's say it together. O Lord I've heard of your renown. And I stand in awe O Lord of your work. In our own time revive it.

[7 : 16] In our own time make it known. In wrath may you remember mercy. And you can see there. That the chorus begins with those words.

I've heard. Then if you flick down and look at verse 16. That we finished last week with. Verse 16 starts with I hear. And verse 16. If you think of it as a song. That's the beginning of the bridge.

So 16 and through to the end of 19 tonight. Is the bridge in this great hymn. This worship hymn. Verse 16. I hear and I tremble within.

My lips quiver at the sound. Rottenness enters my bones. And my steps tremble beneath me. You see Habakkuk has heard God's message.

Judgment is going to come on Judah. For its persistent wickedness. And it's going to be done. Using the Babylonians. And Habakkuk clearly foresaw.

[8 : 14] The terrible destruction. That was going to overtake Jerusalem. And the absolute desolation. Of the temple. And it was the scene. That later the prophet Jeremiah.

Recorded in graphic details. In Lamentations 2. For those who went through. The Lamentations 2 series. With Paul of the morning. You'll remember this well. The description of the starvation.

Of young and old. Of cannibalism. Of children. The destruction of Solomon's temple. And in fact. The apparent end. Of the prophet's own country.

That's important background. Because it's after seeing this. That Habakkuk writes. As we come tonight to verse 17. 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.

[9 : 14] And we'll hesitate just for a moment. Before we go to verse 18. I want you to think about verse 17. These are extraordinary words. They're moving words aren't they?

They're very moving words. They're words of great material suffering. But in order to try and understand the great declaration of faith that comes in verse 18.

We need to enter into the immensity of the trauma that Habakkuk knew lay ahead. You see. Think about that Judean economy. It was based on agriculture.

And also on livestock. And also on livestock. So figs, grapes and olives were lay with the permanent crops. And then the fields were the, if you like, the production house for the annual crops.

So the permanent as well as the annual crops have yielded nothing. And the livestock are all dead.

[10 : 18] It's a diabolical situation. You see. The invading hordes of Babylonians are going to ravage the land and destroy the livestock.

Economic and social devastation. And try as I might to try and picture that for you. I suspect it's hard for each of us living in an urban centre like Melbourne.

So think about verse 17 in these sort of terms. Though the unemployment rate goes to 70%. And the stock exchange halves in value.

Though I have no money to pay any of my bills. Though drought is so severe in Australia that fresh fruit and vegetables are non-existent.

Though petrol is in such short supply that it's rationed out with coupons and no more than 10 litres per week. But even with that I think it's hard for us in the West to enter into the situation that Habakkuk is describing.

[11 : 30] Because you see in Judah there wasn't any department of social security. There was no homeless shelters. And in fact during the destruction of Jerusalem there weren't any well-off relatives to look after you.

So no income meant starvation. And starvation meant death. And death started with those who were the weakest. The young and the old. And then spread to others.

So the reality of the situation for Habakkuk was simply this. All of God's gifts look like they've been taken away. Well as we try and put our minds back into that situation.

I wonder if in your own experience you know what it's like for the fig tree not to blossom. Unfulfilled dreams. Maybe your life seemingly falling apart.

Maybe the loss of something very dear to you. It could be a relationship breakdown. It could be a loss of employment. It could be financial difficulties. It could be rejection or even abuse by a family member.

[12 : 44] But what about if the fig tree doesn't blossom and as well as that the crops fail as well? That might be retrenchment and at the same time being told of a medically incurable disease with a loved one.

You see in a fallen world in which we live. The combinations of failed crops. They're endless aren't they? I wonder if you've experienced such times.

Then I suspect even as we read verse 17 you probably have a pit. Or a way to express it. I guess a feeling of a pit in your stomach.

I know I do when I read that verse. So then how does Habakkuk respond? Look at verse 18.

Yet I'll rejoice in the Lord. I'll exult in the God of my salvation. I mean how did Brother Yun respond? Beaten, battered, tortured.

[13 : 55] And left in a freezing cell. Well, Brother Yun records in his book, The Heavenly Man, that in his prison cell he sang Psalm 150 at the top of his voice.

Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord. Habakkuk's response was, yet I'll rejoice in the Lord.

I'll exult in the God of my salvation. I wonder if you're starting to get a sense of this extraordinary statement of faith. I mean it's the living out of that promise in chapter 2 verse 4.

The righteous will live by faith. If you think about the situation at the end of verse 16, we know that Habakkuk is waiting quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who will attack Judah.

[15 : 20] You see, Habakkuk knows that the people are going to be delivered, but only after a great national and personal experience of calamity. In fact, as we've spoken of in recent weeks, you have to wait another 80 or 90 years for God to judge the Babylonians.

But judge them he did. Waiting patiently by faith. God's promise still 90 years away. The nation was going to be judged by the Babylonians.

And of course, Habakkuk, he knew the theology that, if you like, went behind God's covenant with Israel. Disobedience to their God, disobedience to their king would bring judgment.

God had promised that in Deuteronomy 28. And so you see, verse 17 is actually more than simply explaining great physical hardship. Because as Habakkuk surveys the world around him, he would have known that this time in Old Testament history was in fact the time of God's curse.

It was the time of Deuteronomy 27 and 28. He knew the prophecy of Moses that if Israel didn't obey God's covenant word, then God would curse them and he would bring them into judgment.

[16 : 44] So it's under those sort of mind-boggling, terrible conditions. It's in those conditions that Habakkuk resolves to be joyful.

Not superficially with his eyes closed, pretending that there's these problems with wickedness and injustice. But actually looking truth directly in the face.

So when Habakkuk says, yet I'll rejoice in the Lord, I'll exult in the God of my salvation. He's saying, if you like, although the curse of God is on us, yet I'll rejoice in the Lord.

Yet I'll exult in the Lord, the God of my salvation. And friends, that's a stunning statement, isn't it? Of Old Testament faith. We're reminded of Christ being made the curse for each one of us.

And then through that providing salvation, we read about it in Galatians 3 verse 13. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us.

[17 : 48] For it's written, curse it as everyone who hangs on a tree. In order that in Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

The prophet Habakkuk, he wanted justice. But as Habakkuk, however, contemplated the wrath of God against sin, all sin, the sin of the Judeans, the sin of the Babylonians.

His heart pounded, his lips quivered, and his legs literally trembled. I said last week that we need to know the immensity of God's wrath in order to know the immensity of God's mercy.

In God's unsurpassing grace and mercy, he purposed to direct against his own very self in the person of his son, Jesus Christ, the full weight of that righteous wrath that of each of us as rebellious sinners deserved.

You see, the extraordinary news, the fantastic news of the gospel is that it's in Jesus Christ that hope flowers. Hope flowers in the face of judgment and the wrath of God.

[19 : 07] Well, it's worth as we come to the end of the book just to reflect on the prophet's spiritual journey. You remember in chapter 1 and 2, there's despair.

And then despair turns to prayer in those memorable words. In wrath, remember your mercy. And then tonight in just these few little verses, despair, prayer, and the movement is to what?

It's to praise. You see, despair and prayer are right in particular situations, but Habakkuk moves through them to praise.

It's interesting, isn't it, that in all of his questioning, he doesn't lash out at God in anger. He doesn't, on the other hand, pretend that terrible things won't happen. He knows that terrible things, he knows that calamitous things will happen, and they will happen to those who he loves.

But he proclaims, I'll rejoice in the Lord. Not rejoicing in those circumstances, but rejoicing in the Lord. Maybe even as you think of that, you're reminded of the words of Paul, when Paul himself was imprisoned in Philippians 4.

[20 : 20] Stunning words, really, when you think of his circumstance. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I'll say, rejoice. And often in the Psalms, we encounter those sorts of proclamations.

Psalms 47 is an example of that. Clap your hands, all you people. Shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the Lord, the Most High, is awesome, a great King over all the earth.

He subdued peoples under us, the nations under our feet. He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob, whom he loves. But often as you read this again and again in the Psalms, it's actually people rejoicing over God's good gifts, over God's protection.

I wonder if you're somewhat like me and find it relatively easy to praise the Lord when things are going smoothly, going well in your life.

But the question is, how do we go during times of adversity when we're walking by faith, perplexed by what's happening either to us or in the world that's around us?

[21 : 28] How's our praise then? You see, Habakkuk, he rejoices in the face of extreme suffering. He's prepared to live by faith, those wonderful words, in unseen promises.

But it keeps raising the question, at least in my mind, how is it then that Habakkuk can rejoice? We're saying he's rejoicing, but how can it be? How can brother Yun rejoice with what's happening to him and in the world around him?

And the answer is given to us in verse 19. God, the Lord, is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights.

Why don't you notice that little verse just three things briefly. Because this is the absolute key to understanding rejoicing in the face of such horrendous suffering and difficulty.

Notice there firstly that Habakkuk states that the Lord makes my feet like the feet of a deer. And the word that's used there in fact describes a female deer. And the female deer is able to climb to the highest places, to those very difficult places.

[22 : 49] It's able to run over rocky fields. Because the female deer's got special feet. And so, if you like, Habakkuk rejoices that his metaphorical feet have been designed in such a way so that he can travel over the most difficult ground.

Do you capture that first part of verse 19? Then look at the second. Habakkuk points to the heights. Now, when he talks about the heights, he's not talking about recreational climbing. I mean, this was sort of a recreational activity that came in, I think, from about the 19th century on.

He's not talking about that. The way the word is used describes a place of great difficulty. Of great challenge. The sort of place that you wouldn't go unless it was absolutely necessary.

And then thirdly, notice that Habakkuk states that the Lord makes him tread upon difficult and challenging places. So, if you sit back and reflect on that, Habakkuk knows that the Lord is going to take him to a place that Habakkuk himself doesn't want to go to.

This is a challenging place. This is a very, very difficult place in the life of Habakkuk. But, you see, God the Lord is his strength.

[24 : 10] He's confident that God is going to enable him to do what he could never do on his own. I think that's just a stunning testimony and so easily applicable into every one of our lives, into the just dozens, the myriads of circumstances in this group that are gathered here tonight.

You see, the fact that the Lord is his strength and equips him to go through difficult, challenging places, that's why he's joyful. There are great difficulties ahead.

But God is either going to rescue him from the danger or he's going to allow him to die. But even in allowing him to die, God is the one who's in control of his death.

You see, having sung that great song of triumph in those first 15 verses of chapter 3, we see the prophet with this renewed vigour.

Well, we can rejoice, can't we? Because God is good, because he's wise, because he's in control, and he does actually know what he's doing.

[25 : 22] They're not just superficial words that I'm saying tonight. They're words that in facing difficult and challenging situations, you need to go back and apply regularly appropriate, that he's good, that he's wise, that he is in control, and he knows what he's doing.

I wonder if you've noticed that as you worship, that your perspectives change. What I mean by that is that you become increasingly aligned to the plans and purposes of God.

Those plans and purposes of God which are revealed in his word, they're revealed by his words and also by, indeed, his actions. So when you think about that, let me ask you again, can you trust God in a crisis?

What about the sort of crisis when there's devastation all around you? What about when God's answer isn't what you would prefer to hear?

Because that actually was the situation that Habakkuk was in. I know it's fashionable sometimes in so-called Christian books on a topic like this to somehow apply some secular approach of positive thinking.

[26 : 43] It's got nothing to do with positive thinking. It's simply being realistic about the situation that you're in, having absolute realism of the crisis, of the perplexity, of the suffering that you're enduring, and then remembering and holding on to the supreme truth that God is much greater, much, much greater than all of those circumstances and problems.

The extraordinary faith that was devastated by Habakkuk, it wasn't this case of, sort of in an English way, of a stiff upper lip. It wasn't sort of, I'm going to persevere because that's what I've determined to do.

It's not that. The extraordinary faith is born out of a personal relationship with a living God. It's the living God who does what?

He speaks to us. He listens to us. He interacts with us. He upholds us. It shouldn't be a surprise.

He's our Heavenly Father. He's our Creator. He's our Saviour. He's our Comforter. So as followers of Jesus Christ, let's never lose sight of just that extraordinary, that wonderful privilege we have of actually moment by moment communion with the Lord.

[28 : 01] See, we have that privilege as we pray. We have it as we sing. Sing in the shower. Sing corporately together. We have it as we read. Read His Word.

We have it as we participate in the life of the Church, the body of Christ, because the Spirit indwells us individually and indwells us corporately.

It's an extraordinary privilege. The moment by moment participation of communion with the Lord. So, please don't think of verse 18 as some sort of mantra, that when you run into a problem, you just sort of grit your teeth and say those words again.

The words are a natural expression. They're the natural expression of a personal relationship with the living God. The one who Habakkuk describes how?

As his strength. As the one who makes his feet like the feet of a deer. And the one who makes us tread upon the heights. So, I guess as I was reflecting on this week, this message and the challenges of bringing Habakkuk to you, at least as a human instrument, the question that kept going around in my mind was, I wonder what the high places are that God will take each one of you to.

[29 : 24] I wonder if there will be places of stunning victory. You might think of all sorts of examples of that. You might think of a John Wesley, who had this acclaimed public ministry, that in some ways changed a nation.

You might think of a Jonathan Edwards, bringing revival as God's servant, as God's minister. But, maybe the Lord will take you to high places like Habakkuk.

Perhaps he'll take you to high places like Brother Yun. Dangerous, difficult high places. In World War II, a Christian family in Europe provided their home as a shelter.

It was a shelter for people that were hunted by Nazis. Typically in this home, there'd be six to seven people. It might have comprised three to four Jews and perhaps two, three members of the Dutch underground.

And it was on February 28, 1944, that the family was betrayed. The Gestapo raided the home and the family members were imprisoned. The two sisters who lived in the home spent ten months in three different camps, prisons, and their last encampment, imprisonment, was in the infamous Ravensbrück concentration camp located near Berlin.

[30 : 52] Life in the camp was almost unbearable. But the two sisters spent their time doing what? Sharing Jesus' love with the fellow prisoners.

Many women became Christians during that time. In this terrible place, the women continued to minister, to share the love of God in Christ.

One of the sisters, in fact, died in Ravensbrück and the other one survived. There'll be some, perhaps many gathered here tonight, who'll know her name, Corrie Ten Boom.

So it was, I think she was about 53 when she got out. And she then embarked on this worldwide ministry.

That was a worldwide ministry that took her to 60 countries over a period of the next 33 years of her life. And someone just summed up her ministry simply as, she testified to God's love and she encouraged all that she met with the words that Jesus is victor.

[32 : 01] Well, Corrie was certainly a woman who was faithful to God. Her life was characterised by worship and worship that overflowed into mission.

I think she was a stunning example of Habakkuk 2, verse 4. The righteous will live by faith. But I suspect there was lots in the book of Habakkuk that were precious to Corrie Ten Boom.

I suspect verse 19 of chapter 3 had a very special place as I found this quote of Corrie Ten Boom. She wrote, If God sends us on stony paths he provides strong shoes.

She died on her 91st birthday in April of 1983. Interesting, isn't it? Ten months before Brother Jung was imprisoned.

Well, as we've been over four weeks it's been a great journey with Habakkuk. We've gone from this deep valley of despair to the watchtower where he waited and watched for the word from the Lord and then to the heights of praise.

[33 : 22] I guess as I've worked through this and had various ones of you share with me it's clear that the Holy Spirit has spoken to many of us and certainly including myself.

Holy Spirit has taught us it's his word. He ministers to us and he's taught us that we can ask God difficult questions. We can persist with those difficult questions.

The Spirit's taught us that we can be historically grounded in God's mighty acts of deliverance. That we can hold to God's promises not to our explanations.

And that we can sing the praises of God regardless of the circumstances circumstances in which we might find ourselves at any particular time in our life journey.

So the question is can you say with Habakkuk then verse 18 yet I'll rejoice in the Lord I'll exult in the God of my salvation.

[34 : 22] If you can say those words then I'd like you to join me as we say together that magnificent psalm the psalm that was used by Brother Yun in the prison cell.

If verse 18 is something that you can claim then let's say together Psalm 150 as we conclude. Praise the Lord Praise God in his sanctuary Praise him in his mighty firmament Praise him for his mighty deeds Praise him according to his surpassing greatness Praise him with trumpet sound Praise him with lute and harp Praise him with tambourine and dance Praise him with strings and pipe Praise him with clanging cymbals Praise him with loud clashing cymbals Let everything breeze Praise the Lord Praise the Lord And that's the message tonight Praise the Lord Amen