

In Your Wrath Remember Mercy

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[0 : 0 0] I'll just adjust my volume as we compete with the wind outside. Suitable sound effect for this passage.

The regulars who come to Holy Trinity will be aware that our vicar, Paul Barker, loves travelling. In fact, having attended the wedding of his mate in the UK, he's en route to the delights of Venice and Italy.

And like a vicar, like curate, I enjoy travelling too. Some years ago, I was selling a chain of resort hotels in the Northern Territory in Queensland.

One of the properties was the Crocodile Hotel in Kakadu. Maybe you've been there, maybe you've heard of it. Very interesting architectural design. Anyway, travelling around that area by road, you get sort of a reasonable perspective.

But it's hard to comprehend the lay of the land because you're amongst dirt tracks, scrubby bush and, of course, numerous river crossings.

[1 : 0 4] But in that area, as you climb up some of the rock formations, as well as seeing some wonderful examples of Aboriginal art, you start to appreciate the landscape. Now, of course, the courses of the rivers are easier to make out.

And across to the distance, you look across and you can see the rising cliff face of what's called the escarpment. But then we were taken on a helicopter trip around Kakadu.

And then the perspective is something else. In fact, you see these mini grand canyons as rivers make their way through steep cliff ravines.

You're able to fly over the escarpment. You're able to follow these majestic rivers and then see the eddies. And then you can look out and you can see the rivers going all the way out to the Gulf of Carpentaria.

You see, having the right perspective is important. For those of us who've been with us over the last couple of weeks and when we started the series two weeks ago, you'll recall that Habakkuk is living in the days of a particularly wicked king in Judah, Jehoiakim.

[2 : 1 1] Injustice, idolatry and violence are widespread in the land of Judah. The land of Judah inhabited, populated by God's covenant people. And you'll recall that in chapter one, Habakkuk is in despair.

Think of it as Habakkuk in a deep valley. Habakkuk's in this valley and he thinks that God is inactive. He thinks that God is indifferent. And if you've got your Bibles open there, you'll see in verse two of chapter one, he cries out, Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?

Or cry to you violence and you will not save. And of course, then in verses five to 11, God does reply. And the summary of that is simply, I will judge the people of Judah.

But Habakkuk struggles to get out of the valley in verses 12 to 17. See, he sees God as being inconsistent. God, how could you use those wicked Babylonians as your agents of judgment?

And we saw, didn't we, in chapter one, that during horrible times, during disgusting times, during terrible times in our personal lives, and indeed in the world around us, lamenting and questioning, in fact, allow us to pursue an honest conversation with the Lord.

[3 : 36] And throughout this chapter one, Habakkuk is in a deep valley. But even in that valley, it's not as if he's lost all of his perspective. Do you recall? He holds resolutely to the holiness and the goodness of God.

But in one sense, just holding to that heightens his psychological trauma. Because he just continues to see evil and injustice all around him.

So what did Habakkuk do? Remember the beginning of chapter two? You see, Habakkuk gets up out of the valley where he's been worrying.

And he goes into the watch house. Into the watch house to watch and to wait. Habakkuk waited there. He waited there in confidence that God would answer him.

And in fact, that's exactly what God did. You recall that God told Habakkuk that he was going to judge the proud Babylonians. The proud, self-sufficient Babylonians.

[4 : 47] And the Lord pronounced those five woes that we looked at last week. Five woes against this proud, self-sufficient, God-rebelling nation.

And it was against that background of judgment and sin that just permeates those chapters. That God gave three wonderful gospel promises. We've already referred to two of them tonight.

The righteous will live by faith. One day, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord. And the Lord is in his holy temple.

That is, he is absolutely in control. Ah, yes. As Habakkuk meditates on those promises, it's quite clear that his perspective improves.

I mean, he still may be perplexed about specific things that are happening around him. But he's holding on to what God has revealed to him.

[5 : 43] And I think the application is immediate to us, isn't it? As I know many of you in this room, there are numerous things in your life, specific situations, where you feel perplexed.

My encouragement is then lift yourself up. Get a little higher. Take a broader perspective. Don't miss the big gospel plan of God. He's faithful.

He will deliver on every one of his promises. So as we come to chapter 3 tonight, Habakkuk has climbed out of this valley of lament.

He's moved even higher than where he was on the watchtower, where he watched and waited. And as we come to chapter 3, what's he doing? He's worshipping. He's witnessing. His centre, his focus is on the living God.

Habakkuk is learning to live by faith. So let's then look at the beginning of chapter 3. And the first thing you probably already noticed as it was read, that just the style of this chapter is so different to chapters 1 and 2.

[6 : 52] Chapters 1 and 2 with that sort of dialogue. And as you come to chapter 3, it's a song. Well, actually, it's a prayer, but it's sung as a hymn. And the last verse, verse 19 that we'll look at next week, in fact, gives the musical directions for this song.

It's a worship song. Different sort of worship song in some ways to ones that we might sing in the 21st century. And the song functions as Habakkuk's response to God's revelation to him.

You see, those hard, probing questions that Habakkuk had in chapters 1 and 2, they didn't lead him to fatalism. They didn't lead him to cynicism.

They didn't lead him to scepticism. In fact, you see, the book climaxes with worship. And I think we can understand this message in some ways a difficult chapter if we just spend some time understanding the structure of the song.

You might notice as you look at your text there that after verses 3, 9, and 13, there's that little word *selah*. S-E-L-A-H. And so the first part of each of those verses actually works as a title.

[8 : 03] It works as a title for a stanza, if you think of a stanza or a verse in a song. And so the way to think of the structure of this chapter is simply this. Verse 2 acts as the chorus.

It's the refrain. And then you have a series of stanzas. And after each stanza, if you like, there's the chorus. So stanza 1, verses 3 to 8. And then again the chorus. And stanza 2.

And then the chorus. And then stanza 3, the end of verse 13 through to 15. The chorus and then the beginning, as we would think of it in a musical item, of a bridge.

I think you'll find as we go through that, the force of the message comes through. As you think of the way that this song would have been sung. Well, fundamentally the song describes the theophany.

Sounds a fancy word, but it's simply meaning a physical manifestation, an appearance of Yahweh. In fact, in the Old Testament, these verses that we're looking at tonight, verses 3 to 15, are probably one of the great descriptions of God's appearance in the world.

[9 : 09] Theophanies are dramatic, aren't they? As you read about them in scripture. They change our perception of reality. Because so often, even as Christians, we're tempted to think, where's God?

He's not present. And our perception is changed, just like that. Let's look at the chorus then. Verse 2.

Oh, Lord, I've heard of your renown and I stand in awe. Oh, Lord, of your work. In our own time, revive it. In our own time, make it known. In wrath, may you remember mercy.

Verse 2. The chorus, the refrain, is actually the summary for the chapter. It's a good way to remember it. The chorus gets sung after every one of these stanzas, in the way they probably did it.

And it summarizes the chapter. Well, what's this renown of which the prophet stands in awe? What's this work of God that the prophet stands in awe of? The answer simply then flows from verse 3 through to verse 15.

[10 : 15] The prophet is living in about 610 BC, and he looks all the way back to the time of the Exodus, say, approximately 1400 BC.

And as you go through it, it's a difficult text, but think of it as this collage of images. And they're images that pick up different parts of Israel's history. They are images of deliverance.

They're images of Yahweh as the warrior. They're images of Yahweh as the deliverer. The focus is primarily on the event of the Exodus.

And, of course, this was the major theme of Israelite worship in the Old Testament. And it's the wonderful spiritual image that then gets picked up in the New Testament. So Habakkuk, who's been down in the valley, comes up to the watchtower.

He's now getting himself up to a good height. He's got a good perspective. There's a lot that he can survey. I mean, he looks back to 400 years of slavery in Egypt, to deliverance from Pharaoh.

[11 : 22] He looks back to wilderness wanderings, to events around Mount Sinai, and then the handover from Moses to Joshua, and then, indeed, into the Promised Land.

And he's praying to the Lord. He knows that the nation of Judah deserves wrath. But he prays, Lord, in wrath. In wrath, may you remember mercy.

That is, as you saved your people in the past, back in the time of the Exodus, Lord, so save your people at the end of the exile. Well, let's then look at the first stanza, the first verse of this song.

And in our text, it's verses 3 to 8. You'll see the title of it is just that beginning of verse 3. God came from Timon, the Holy One from Mount Paran. Kind of interesting words, aren't they?

He sees Yahweh, the image is Yahweh coming up from the south because that word there, Timon, in fact, describes an area in southern Palestine. And Paran, in fact, is further south.

[12 : 27] And it's the area in the eastern part of the Sinai Peninsula. So we're in the area of Mount Sinai. And what do we go on and read? God's glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.

The brightness was like the sun, rays came forth from his hand where his power lay hidden. That image is striking, isn't it? It's an allusion to God's coming to Israel at Mount Sinai and making covenant with the nation of Israel.

You see, Habakkuk's getting up quite high. He's got this great perspective. Each time I looked at this text, I thought, yeah, that's right. I remember what it was like flying over Kakadu. What a tremendous perspective when you could get high enough out of the scrub.

And when he's up there, Habakkuk looks back. He looks back to God's great acts of deliverance. And when he does that, it gives him hope. It gives him the confidence then, in fact, to look to the future.

See what he's doing? He looks back, and in looking at what God's done, it gives him hope. It gives him confidence in the future. Hope for troubled times. Hope for perplexing times.

[13 : 39] Hope for times like the ones that we live in. Habakkuk doesn't just look back. He also looks ahead. Notice there in the verse, God's glory covered the heavens, and the earth was full of his praise.

You see, Habakkuk is up high. He looks back, and he looks forward, and he looks forward to the end times. It's, I guess, the word that sort of sums that up is it's an eschatological vision.

It's a fancy word, but it's just simply meaning, if you like, the end of times when Christ returns. It's the great promise of chapter 2, verse 14. This is the time when the earth will be filled with what?

The knowledge of the glory of the Lord. And friends, we look back, don't we? We look back to the death and resurrection of Christ, and we look forward to the coming of Christ.

I'm reminded of Matthew 24, verse 30. That just seems to pick that up so well. We read, then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven.

[14 : 49] How? With power and great glory. That, in fact, is when Habakkuk's vision will be fully realized.

Looking back, looking forward, living by faith. Knowing that the sovereign Lord is in his temple, he's in absolute sovereign control, and he is bringing everything to a point of completion.

If you look at the text there on verse 5, verse 5 simply recalls the plagues in Exodus. You recall those plagues that were brought as the means by which God rescued his people from slavery, delivered them, brought them to himself.

And then verse 6, a challenging verse, but it's simply describing the destruction of the shrines that were up on the high hills of Canaan. Those false gods, those gods of Baal.

And in verses 7 and 8, you've got, again, a powerful image of Yahweh on the move. You see, the tents of Cushion and the dwellings of Midian, they refer to people down in the south.

[16 : 01] And the idea is Yahweh is marching past, the Lord is marching past, and what are they doing? They're trembling. Why are they trembling? They're trembling because they're worshipping Yahweh?

No, they're worshipping false gods. And so in verse 8, Habakkuk asks three rhetorical questions. Was Yahweh's anger against the rivers?

Was it against the streams? Was it against the sea? And you can sort of hear the answer screaming back. Of course it wasn't. These indeed were the very instruments of creation that God used against those who opposed his people.

You see, what confidence Habakkuk was given as he recalled the Lord's awesome deeds. So this first stanza, this first song verse of the hymn has described the physical power of God's wrath in the earth.

So imagine if we were singing it, we then come to the chorus. And I'd like you, we've got that up on the screen for us, let's simply say this chorus together as the summary of the chapter. O Lord, I've heard of your renown and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work.

[17 : 19] In our own time, revive it. In our own time, make it known. In wrath, may you remember mercy. In verse 9, Habakkuk then begins his second stanza, if you like, the second verse of the song.

And in this one, he describes the purpose of God's wrath. And again, you've got the title at the beginning of verse 9. You brandished your naked bow, sated with the arrows at your command.

And so this second stanza, it recalls the Lord's work. The Lord's work when he created the world out of chaos, but it also has a reminder of specific events, events like the Exodus, and indeed, possibly, events described in Joshua 10 when the sun stood still, and that enabled Joshua to lead Israel to victory over the Amorites.

You split the earth with rivers, verse 9. The mountains saw you and writhed. A torrent of water swept by. The deep gave forth its voice. The sun raised high its hands. The moon stood still in its exalted place, at the light of your arrows speeding by, at the gleam of your flashing spear.

This second stanza of the song, what does it do? It describes the purpose of God's wrath. Challenging verses. Look at 12 and 13.

[18 : 42] In fury you trod the earth. In anger you trampled the nations. You came forth to save your people, to save your anointed.

Do you remember Habakkuk's concern back in chapter 1, right at the beginning, when he's in that valley of despair? He questions God. I mean, God, why aren't you listening? Why don't you save?

But Habakkuk has now climbed up higher. He's surveying the biblical landscape. And when he does that, he worships the living God.

He worships the personal God. He worships the active God. He worships the sovereign God. He worships the God who cares for his people and cares about his world.

You see, for Habakkuk, remembering God's creating power and his mighty acts of deliverance, they become the substance of his hope and faith.

[19 : 50] Friends, we look back to the death and resurrection of Christ. And then we look forward to the coming of the Lord Jesus in power and glory. Looking back, looking forward, living by faith, knowing that the sovereign Lord is completely in control, no matter the troubling, perplexing times that we live in.

Well, at the end of stanza two, of course, we're back to the chorus. It's a great chorus. Let's say it again together. Oh, Lord, I've heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, oh, Lord, of your work.

In our own time, revive it. In our own time, make it known. In wrath, may you remember mercy. This third stanza that we're coming to now of his worship song gives the reason for why Yahweh personally intervened.

The title, again, is at the end of verse 13. You crushed the head of the wicked house, laying it bare from the foundation to the roof. And this verse, this stanza of the song, again, is looking back to the time of the Exodus.

God visited and he redeemed his people and he rescued them from bondage. And when he rescued them, he made a covenant with them so that he'd be their king and he'd bring them into the promised land.

[21 : 17] And so again, the people would be singing back to the chorus at the end of that verse. Oh, Lord, I've heard of your renown. I stand in awe, oh, Lord, of your work.

In our own time, revive it. In our own time, make it known. In wrath, may you remember mercy. Notice that the chorus begins with those little words after, oh, Lord, I've heard.

And then that connects with verse 16 where Habakkuk begins the musical bridge. And he simply says, I hear. You see, Habakkuk has heard God's message.

Judgment will come on Judah for its persistent wickedness and he's going to use the Babylonians. But judgment will come on the Babylonians, the proud, rebellious, self-sufficient, idolatrous nation.

Habakkuk had asked for justice. And verse 16 tells us that Habakkuk trembled, trembled in his body as he considered God's response.

[22 : 30] The end of verse 16, Habakkuk waits quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attacked Judah. You see, Habakkuk knows that God's people will be delivered, but only, only after a national and personal experience of calamity.

In fact, Habakkuk, if he was still alive through this time, had to wait 80, 90 years until God judged Babylon. He did judge Babylon. He judged it in 539 BC using the Medes and the Persians.

Waiting patiently by faith. God's promise for Habakkuk is still 90 years away. So Habakkuk was reassured that the Lord would save his people, that salvation, if you like, in the fullest sense was still future for Habakkuk because it came in the Lord Jesus in his life and death and resurrection.

We look back, don't we, to the Lord's death and resurrection and we look forward to his coming and in the meantime, we live by faith. Verse 2, that really is a super summary, isn't it, of the chapter?

Lord, in your wrath, remember mercy. Think about it. I mean, Habakkuk knows that the sinful people of Judah as well as the Babylonians deserve God's wrath.

[24 : 03] He knows that God is right to judge them. And Habakkuk sees that unless God shows mercy, all, all face judgment.

In both the Old and the New Testaments, the biblical authors speak often about God's wrath. They say it is God's displeasure at evil.

They say that God has a passionate resistance to every will that is opposed to him. And they say that God will judiciously attack every will in opposition.

And the same scriptures that teach so much about the love of God, they insist just as strongly that God is holy.

And in scripture, God's wrath is nothing other than when his holiness confronts the rebellion of his creatures. God's attitude to sinners as sinners, his attitude to sinners as sinners is antagonism and it's wrath.

[25 : 23] However, God's good will towards them is that they would turn around, that they would be converted, that they would be forgiven.

The great news is that wrath is not the last word. I'm glad it is in my personal life and I'm glad it is in this sermon.

There is forgiveness but it necessarily requires laying aside, dealing with wrath. And God himself has provided for the removal of that wrath.

And I want you to think of it this way. Either God's wrath manifests itself on us as a sinner or else Christ dies for us.

The supreme wonder of the cross is that it's at the cross where God's wrath and his mercy meet. At the cross wrath and mercy meet.

[26 : 30] let me read this to you and I've put it up on the slide because on the one hand this might sound very theological for quarter to eight on a Sunday night but this is the heart of the cross which we need to grab hold of, understand the magnificence of God's salvation.

God because in his mercy he willed to forgive sinful men and women and God being truly merciful he willed to forgive them righteously that is without in any way condoning their sin he purposed to direct what?

against his own self in the person of his son the full weight of that righteous wrath which they deserved.

It's kind of a mouthful isn't it? There isn't just two or three words that sums it up. God because in his mercy he willed to forgive sinful men and women and he is truly merciful he willed to forgive them righteously he wasn't going to and couldn't condone their sin so he purposed to direct in his very self in the person of Jesus Christ the full weight of that righteous wrath the wrath that we deserved as rebellious creatures.

Many in the room I know will be aware that liberal theology simply declares God God is love. That's true. God is love. But God is more than that and liberal theology dismisses God's righteous anger.

[28 : 23] It dismisses God's wrath. The tragedy is in the last decade probably a number of writers and they certainly call themselves evangelicals when they're marketing their books.

They are doing exactly the same thing. But I want to say this to you. The God that they write about is actually not the God that's revealed in Holy Scripture because Christians who don't believe in the wrath of God will not know how merciful God is.

We need to know the immensity of God's wrath if we're to know the immensity of God's mercy. friends we can't have the slightest idea of what Jesus did on the cross unless we see that God cannot tolerate sin and that he must punish every evil act.

Habakkuk of course he couldn't see all of the wonder of the cross in the time that he lived. He I think saw a view of it if you like he saw through a glass dimly.

It hadn't been fully revealed to him had it how God could be perfectly just and perfectly merciful. But for us we live on the other side of the cross and we see God's mercy clearly.

[29 : 53] The question that was on my mind as I thought about this is we're on this side of the cross we see God's mercy clearly but I wonder if we see God's wrath as clearly as Habakkuk did.

Well Habakkuk's perplexity and despair was what was happening around him as we read in chapter 1. It gives way. It moves to just this exalted praise in chapter 3.

You see he meditates on the living God and he takes a broad biblical perspective. He wasn't any longer down amongst those shrubby trees that I remember in Kakadu.

He was up high, he had a terrific panorama. He remembered the mighty acts of Yahweh, the deliverer. He remembered his grace and his mercy in centuries past and that gave Habakkuk the foundation for trust and hope in the future.

And then we move all the way through don't we to 2001. And each of us live in a fallen world. We live in a suffering world. We live in an unjust world and a world of great violence.

[31 : 08] It's a world full of proud, self-worshipping, rebellious people. And who are those sorts of people? Me, for I was saved. You, before you trusted in Christ.

And in this sort of world that we live in, it's easy to be perplexed. It's easy to be perplexed about what's happening in our life and what's happening in the world around us. We have to maintain, maybe the expression I'd use, a broad and narrow vision.

When I was recruiting managers and team leaders in the oil and gas company that I worked for, that was in fact one of the key qualities that I looked for in people. Were they able to hold a broad and narrow vision simultaneously?

As Christians, we need to do that. Well, what's a narrow focus as a Christian? As followers of the Lord Jesus, no matter what's happening in our life and what's happening in the world around us, what do we know?

We know that the Lord cares for us, that he's there with us, that he ministers to us, that he encourages us and he strengthens us. That's what I've dubbed, if you like, a narrow vision.

[32 : 21] But we need a broad vision and the broad vision in fact looks back and looks forward. The broad vision looks back to God's great acts of deliverance and supremely salvation in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And when we do that, we're encouraged and then we look forward in great confidence, in total confidence, to the return of the Lord Jesus in power and glory. And that will be the time when, as we read in chapter 2, verse 14, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.

Friends, we can do this with absolute confidence because God is faithful. His word has never failed. His word will never fail.

And as we wait for that coming, we live by faith. Of course, I appreciate that circumstances in our life can change. Things mightn't seem all that straightforward.

But in those situations, we know that God's purposes don't change and his promises don't change. And those comments, I guess, are directed to the many here tonight, the great majority who know and love the Lord Jesus.

[33 : 39] But perhaps tonight, there's someone who I'm speaking to, who, like the Babylonians, is seeking to be self-sufficient. That is, rejecting the living God.

Rejecting God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. And the shocking message, the truthful message of that is, if that is your situation, then you're under God's wrath.

wrath. That's the situation that I was under before I trusted in Jesus Christ. In fact, outside of a relationship with Jesus Christ, that's the situation that everybody is in, under God's wrath.

The very chapter with the famous gospel, verse John 3.16, concludes with that truth in John 3.36. So, friend, if you're here tonight and you recognise that you are not in a relationship with Christ, then as I finish, let me encourage you to hear and respond to these great words of gospel promise from Romans 5.

God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we've been justified, that is, declared right before him by his blood, we will be saved through him.

[35 : 05] Saved through him from what? Saved through him from the wrath of God. Father, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for your spirit that ministers to us as we read your word and study your word and proclaim your word. Lord, as we think of the prophet Habakkuk living in such difficult times, perplexing times, Lord, we thank you for the great lessons in that, that Habakkuk was able to lament with you, to question, but to hold on to the essential facts of your being and to lift himself up and then finally get to a point where he had such a wonderful perspective of looking back over such great deeds of deliverance and looking forward to the time when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.

Lord, I pray for each one of us here tonight that living in 2005, in difficult times, in perplexing times, in challenging international times and for many in challenging individual times, that Lord, we will regularly, continually look back to the wonder of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, where the wrath of God was born for our sake.

Lord, we thank you for just the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and what was achieved on the cross. And Lord, as we sang earlier tonight, when we reflect on that, our prayer is that we would, our lives would be a sacrifice of living worship to the Lamb of God.

And Lord, for anyone who's here, who is not in personal relationship with you, I pray that they would be rightly most uncomfortable in the situation that they're in and acknowledge the truth of Scripture that they are under the wrath of God.

[37 : 16] But in doing that, that they would turn to such a gracious and merciful God with the salvation that's provided in Christ. We ask this for his name's sake.

Amen.