

How to Live Righteously

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 28th of September 2003.

The preacher is Carol Elpherson. Her sermon is entitled How to Live Righteously and is based on Habakkuk chapter 2 verses 1 to 5.

Well this morning we're looking at Habakkuk, a book in the Old Testament and it can be found on page 762 in your pew Bibles if you wanted to open it to follow it along.

And the passage itself comes in the second of three chapters and so we'll have a little bit of a lead up to it so that you get an understanding of where this passage fits in to the whole of the book of Habakkuk.

Now Habakkuk is the title of a prophet it says at the beginning of chapter 1 and it means that he was probably, that was his profession, he was a prophet.

[1 : 11] Sometimes in the Old Testament prophets such as Amos were just raised up at certain times to deliver a certain message of God's but it seems like Habakkuk was a prophet of the temple or the court and so he's given that title in the book of Habakkuk.

And he lived in Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel in the last quarter of the 7th century BC. A hundred years previously the northern kingdom, which was called Israel, had been conquered and destroyed by the Assyrian army.

The people had been dispersed and it was seen as a direct consequence of the people's disobedience, of their failure to live according to the covenant laws of God.

Now Habakkuk is looking around him in the people of Judah and he sees violence, oppression and lawlessness. He sees that evil is going unchecked and that wrongdoing is prospering.

Evil and wickedness seem to be succeeding at the expense of the righteous people and justice was being denied. And so Habakkuk calls out to God in the beginning of chapter 1 he starts in verse 2, he says O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?

[2 : 39] Or cry to you violence and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me Strife and contention arise So the law becomes slack And justice never prevails The wicked surround the righteous Therefore judgment comes forth perverted This was an appalling situation for Habakkuk and he'd obviously been calling out for some time for God to act and he couldn't understand God's silence He couldn't understand why God seems to be tolerating such abuse and such wickedness He couldn't understand above all things why God's law was being violated and how this seemed to be being tolerated and how justice was being ignored because he knew God and he knew God was a righteous God and he knew that God's laws were to be upheld and the problem was coming from the top from Judah's leaders

At the time, the king was at that time was Jehoiakim and he was the son of Josiah. You may recall that Josiah was one of the few kings in that time who showed good and strong and godly leadership and even though he came to the throne at only eight years of age by the time he was 16 he wanted to seek after the God of King David and by the time he was 20 he started radical reforms in the country to purge Judah of idolatry and human sacrifices that had started coming up during the time of Manasseh the evil king who was actually Josiah's grandfather and so whilst great reforms came through the land in the time of Josiah unfortunately his son didn't follow in his footsteps instead he chose to live in luxury at the expense of the people and he denied justice and it's this situation that brings Habakkuk to the point of his first complaint to God he's wanting change he's wanting a cleansing of the wickedness that he can see and he's probably thinking in terms of having a return to the time of Josiah a time of those reforms a time when Josiah was doing the reforms they discovered the abandoned book of the law probably Deuteronomy in the temple and Josiah reinstituted the following of that and this is what he's thinking will be the answer to his prayer so but God answers Habakkuk and I'll just read the answers in verse 5 to 11 of chapter 1

I won't read them out but God's actually saying what he's going to do is send an army the Chaldeans or better known as the Babylonians and they're going to invade Judah well this was an answer that was totally from left field this was not the sort of answer that Habakkuk was expecting it was totally unexpected and so he struggles with the answer because he's already struggling with a lack of righteousness amongst the leaders of Israel and then God gives him this answer by saying he's going to deal with the situation by sending this army the most powerful army in the world to invade Judah this army was so strong and powerful fortresses fell to their hold they would tunnel under walls and nothing was seen to be able to forestall them even the Egyptian army which was a powerful army at the time also was outmaneuvered by them in a decisive battle their skill savagery and their brutality was legendary and so Habakkuk sees that they're going to sweep through Judah like a gale force wind leaving nothing standing and he's absolutely flabbergasted at this finding the solution that God has given him to be totally incomprehensible so he goes back to God with another question in verse 13 of chapter 1 he says your eyes are too pure to behold evil and you cannot look on wrongdoing why do you look on the treacherous and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they

Habakkuk knew that the people of Judah were acting wrongly but his question to God is how can God use who is righteous use such wicked people to bring about a judgment causing utter devastation to his own nation this is a man of faith and he knew God to be a just and righteous God and he also thinks that if Judah totally wiped out it would mean that God's people would be destroyed the people God had chosen back in the time of Abraham to be his nation to be his holy people were going to be destroyed by ruthless sinful Gentiles and so this is the situation we meet Habakkuk at now at the beginning of chapter 2 with the perplexed Habakkuk awaiting God's answer he and it's interesting to note that he doesn't attempt to rationalise this answer that he can't understand and he doesn't try to change it he doesn't try to make it more palatable he knows that it's the true word of God and so he's responded and now he waits for an answer and he waits patiently knowing that an answer will come and he waits expectantly like a soldier on duty he's prepared and alert to see what the Lord will say to him and as we see time and time again in the Bible

God can handle people's questions he knows full well what we're all thinking and he would far prefer a genuine enquiry a heartfelt cry of anguish honest questioning he would prefer these ways and the way that Habakkuk has brought his difficult situation back to God he would prefer a healthy debate than to have someone withdraw and break off all communication and sadly this is what happens many times I've heard when I'm talking to people about why they no longer attend church and they say well I used to go I used to be a believer I used to go regularly but often as I'm talking to them something quite catastrophic happened in their lives perhaps it was the sudden and unexpected death of a loved one or some other major catastrophe and they just couldn't understand why it happened they couldn't understand where was God working in the situation and so instead of like Habakkuk taking it back and clinging to God and expecting an answer they withdrew and stopped coming they stopped seeking an answer from the one who was going to be able to give them that answer the only one who was really going to help them heal in that pain and so those people tend to go along stumbling looking for answers but forsaking the source of the true answers and others will say oh well I prayed to God but he didn't answer me and often it wasn't perhaps it wasn't an answer that they were expecting like Habakkuk he was not expecting this answer to his prayer not in a million years but it was God's answer and he recognised it as being such

[10 : 49] I think too often we think of our answer as we're actually on the way of praying our prayer we'll be thinking of yes this is the way God will deal with it this will be the answer type of thing and when that answer doesn't come forth then people will often think well God hasn't answered our prayer as the great reformer John Calvin once said as long as we judge according to our own perceptions we walk on the earth and while we do so many clouds arise and Satan scatters ashes in our eyes and wholly darkens our judgement that we lie down altogether confused he says it's necessary that we should come to God himself and let the word of God become our ladder and I think that's a really great description and image of the word of God becoming our ladder to our understanding and that's what Habakkuk does he searches for understanding of God's word taking his understanding of God's ways back to him and challenging him and having had the boldness and the courage to do this

Habakkuk then waits with every sense tuned it's almost on the lookout for an answer and his patience and his persistence is rewarded and we don't know how long he waited the Bible doesn't tell us but there's a sense that there was a period of time in which he did have to wait for this and verse 2 begins then the Lord answered me and said God answers him not sternly and not by way of rebuke as he may well have been expecting but by a vision and he's told to write it down whilst God is answering Habakkuk the answer is not just for him alone it's going to be it's going to be made plain and clear so that others can see it also and there's an echo of having to write it on the tablets an echo of the Ten Commandments because writing in tablets whilst that was that was common in the Near East times it wasn't actually common in Israel Israel they usually wrote on papyrus papers or on animal hides and so writing it on tablets was something unusual and the vision is to be written down so that a runner may read it like moving billboards of a trailer the tablets would be visible and durable the message of the vision is to be proclaimed to others and as the

Ten Commandments were written on stone and given to Moses for the present and future generations it seems that this vision is for future generations also but the vision is to await its appointed time in verse 3 God has set a specific time when his purpose will be fulfilled and as a marathon runner puffs and pans towards the finishing line so too the appointed time hastens towards its end it's hard to understand what the vision really is because we're not exactly told verse 3 says it speaks of the end but does not lie the end could refer to the Babylonian rule to the end of the Babylonian rule but like much Old Testament prophecy it also contains a future thrust looking forward to the end times to that final day of the Lord to the time when God's kingdom will be fully consummated on earth to the time when Jesus returns in power and glory it's the day when the whole of creation has been groaning for

Habakkuk and future generations are assured that although there may seem to be delays in God's purposes these will not be thwarted time is not moving around in endless circles going around and around not getting anywhere instead it's marching steadfastly and purposely forward to a particular goal and in a particular direction the day of the Lord will come God's kingdom will be established that has been established through Jesus' life, death and resurrection will come to its final consummation nothing is going to stop it and as in the letter of 2 Peter he says the Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness but is forbearing toward you not wishing that anyone should perish but that all should reach repentance the time will come when the vision is fulfilled and what's important is how do we wait in that time how is

Habakkuk told how to wait and how is that message received and verse 4 tells us that God says there are two responses to this vision those who are proud contrast with the righteous the righteous will accept the message and will rely on it will trust it the wicked on the other hand will pervert it and the Hebrew words in this context convey the idea of a message getting stuck in the throat like a fish bone getting stuck a throat that is puffed up swollen tumorous even cannot swallow the message properly it gets caught a proud person cannot have a spirit that's right within them their pride and self reliance excludes them from seeking God's righteousness they can't see their need because their judgment is distorted and the people of Judah who are living in disregard for God's laws living without regard for their neighbours and in neglect of his call for compassion mercy and righteousness will be judged by

[16 : 38] God and so too will the Babylonian army and it's a warning too for all of us about pride about being careful not to let pride come into our lives pride will distort God's message even within the church but on the other hand the righteous person will live because of his faithfulness to God righteousness throughout the Bible means fulfilling the demands of a right relationship to God and that relationship in the old covenant was established with God in the ten commandments in the old covenant with Moses with an obedience to his commandments walking in his ways and trusting him as the source of one's life of course with Jesus' death on the cross that righteous requirement is in faith in

Jesus in accepting his death for the forgiveness of our sins God is faithful to his people unlike those who rely on themselves the righteous person will wait because of his trust in the dependability of God's plan one of God's attributes is his trustworthiness and righteousness is trusting in him confident that what he says he will do confident that he is able and steadfast that God will not deceive nor fail his dependability is unable to be separated from his word he is reliable therefore those who trust in him will live because life itself is not a right but a gift from God in verse 4 the statement the righteous will live by their faith is an affirmation of Habakkuk's faith in God and an encouragement that those circumstances look very bleak though they look ominous and though the wicked seem to prosper this will not continue that justice will prevail back in

Genesis when Abraham at an old age was promised that he would have descendants as numerous as the stars Abraham accepted this promise he believed that what God said was true and we're told that he believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness even though he was well and truly in his 90s before Isaac was born and Sarah was well past childbearing age he had believed that what the Lord said would come about and it was credited to him as righteousness faith in God trust in his word and his saving action of Jesus' death on the cross is the core message of the gospel it was this understanding of righteousness in the book of Romans that enlightened Martin Luther and fuelled the reformation of the 16th century and it's also quoted in the book of Hebrews but Paul will be speaking more on that next week so I won't go into that by assuring

Habakkuk that the righteous will live by their faith God shows him that the sweeping judgment on Judah will not be total not everybody will be wiped out when the Babylonian strike a righteous remnant will be spared and of course it was this remnant that went into exile with Jeremiah before Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC this passage shows us the basis of life is steadfast faithfulness total dependence on God trust in Jesus Christ's death on the cross and trust in his word it's this hanging on to God despite the calamities in life that will enable Habakkuk and others to live it gives a resilience a calm resolve to face trials ahead in the second world war Corrie ten Boom experienced this sort of resolve calm resolve contentment almost in the

Nazi camp she said that each morning at 4.30 the women would be forced to stand without moving for hours on end in the cold and they would hear the cry and screams from nearby punishment barracks but at every opportunity she and her sister would read from Romans 8 on the assurance that nothing could separate them from the love of Christ neither tribulation distress persecution famine nakedness peril nor the sword that in all these things they reminded each other and those around them that they are more than conquerors through Christ who loves them years later Corrie said we knew we were conquerors it was not just a wish it was a fact she said that life at the camp was experienced at two levels the external observable life was one that grew more horrible each day but the life that she lived with God grew better each day truth upon truth glory upon glory the apostle

[22 : 11] Paul wrote from Ephesian prison rejoice in the Lord always I have learnt in whatever state I'm in to be content a life of steadfast faith is built on the knowledge of God through his word patience and hope Habakkuk exhibited these qualities he waited patiently for God's word and answered to his prayer and he waited expectantly with hope his hope was that God would answer his hope wasn't wishful thinking the sort of pie in the sky type of hope not the sort of hope that I had Saturday week ago when the Sydney swans came through brilliantly in that third quarter only to be thoroughly beaten in the fourth quarter Habakkuk's hope is a firm hope grounded in the knowledge and trust of a faithful God such faith is grown as God's word is learnt through reading daily through

Bible studies through attending church and understanding the faithfulness of God to his people throughout the history of the time of the Bible at the same time faith is grown as God is trusted in each situation that we find ourselves in day by day week by week year by year faith grows by looking over our lives and seeing God at work in the different and difficult situations it's looking at life through the spectacles of faith that enables our faith to grow the life of faith clings to God for answers for help for understanding not only during the difficult times but also when everything seems to be going along well when all things are just bubbling along smoothly the life of faith remains hopeful that God will bring about his purposes in our lives so that we like the Apostle Paul can rejoice in the Lord knowing contentment in all situations but verse 5 shows the tension in which the prophet will live and the tension in which

I think we all live from time to time the Lord assures Habakkuk that though the wicked are living and will be used by God they will not endure the rest of the chapter are oracles of judgment for the Babylonians though they are powerful world leaders at this time they will not last they too will be judged by God for their unrighteousness as Christians living in the end times we need to hear this message and to remember it after yesterday's grand final win Michael Voss said that the lions won because of their mental toughness their perseverance and courage and I think that these are disciplines and qualities that as Christians we too need to develop when speaking of the end times Jesus warned his disciples to be on their guard he said it will be a time of unqualified distress a time when brother will betray brother to death a time no one would survive if God had not cut it short for the sake of the elect but after such a time the son of

God will come with great power and glory his people will be gathered from the ends of the earth into heaven this is the vision of hope a vision of great joy and promise that we have and that we can cling to the promises of a faithful God of a living hope through Jesus Christ into an inheritance that is imperishable undefiled and unfading kept in heaven and as Christians we have more than a vision we have God's Holy Spirit indwelling within us as our guarantee a deposit of what is to come Habakkuk responds to God's promise of hope and judgment with a prayer of reverence and faith in chapter three he recalls God's saving works he recalls the mighty things he's done in the past and he submits himself to whatever may come in future we see in the book of Habakkuk a real movement of faith of this person the book of Habakkuk ends with one of the most wonderful statements of faith found in the Bible it speaks of a faith in God that is certain despite all appearances to the contrary that God is sovereign he is the source of joy strength and life and I'll just finish with just reading a couple of verses from that final chapter of Habakkuk starting halfway through verse 16

Habakkuk says I wait quietly for the day of calamity to come upon the people who attack us though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines though the produce of the olive fails and the field yields no food though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls yet I will rejoice in the Lord I will exult in the God of my salvation God the Lord is my strength he makes my feet like the feet of a deer and makes me tread upon the heights Amen