

GOD, where are YOU when bad things happen?

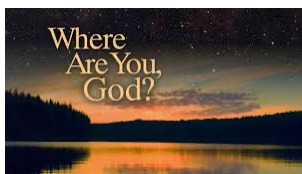


WELCOME/INTIMATIONS

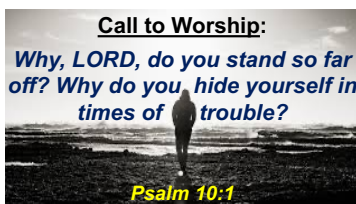
Welcome to this morning's service which I am taking in the absence of Charles and Evelyn on holiday in their yurt! Andrew and Judith are also both away, so we do not have the benefit of Andrew's guitar – or Liam's drum - to lead us in worship. It is a return to *'auld claes an parritch'*, I am afraid ... as we welcome back the Digital Hymnal. Please note, that I have programmed the hymnal with an introduction to each hymn before the hymn starts properly.

Today, I am going to be posing a question of God,

'God, **where** are **you** when bad things happen?'



And our Call to Worship reflects this. It's a plea of David from the Psalms...



We will explore the answer to this conundrum later but perhaps we just have to be satisfied with the words of our first hymn... [

MISSION PRAISE 193: 'God moves in a mysterious way'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znmZswr2J2w>

PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

O Lord, our God

You move in ways which at times are a total mystery to us.

Nevertheless, we **know** that you are our refuge and our strength.

You are our ever-present help in times of trouble.

When it seems like our world is crumbling around about us, and we are being tossed about by the storms of life, take away our fear.

When we are weak, you are our strength.

When we are vulnerable, you are our refuge.

When we cry out for help, you will answer.

Remind us Lord that you are always with us.

You will never leave us or forsake us.

Lord, you are our rock and our redeemer,
you know everything about us.

You have rescued us from our sin,
you have called us by name. We belong to you.

As we pass through the storms of life, you are with us.

You say that we will not be overwhelmed in the flood or consumed by the fire.

You are our Saviour in every part of our lives. You give us everything that we need.

Even the breath that we use to pray this prayer is a gift from you.

Help us always to rely on you – in the bad times as well as the good.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray all these things... and we pray the prayer that he taught us to pray...

Our Father

Which art in heaven
Hallowed be thy name
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil
For thine is the kingdom
The power and the glory
Forever.
Amen.

[

SETTING THE SCENE



It is hard to look at the chaos, the tragedies, the broken relationships, and the broken lives around the world today – at the **seeming** triumph of evil over good – and explain how **God**, if he **is** who he **says** he is, could **possibly** allow these things to happen. The question inevitably springs

to mind. 'If God is out there, why on **earth** does he not intervene?' Can there possibly be any good **reason** for the pain, disappointment and heartache faced by so many people?

Has there ever been a time when **you**, personally, because of what you have experienced in your life, have **doubted** the existence of God? Perhaps, despite sitting out there 'in the pews' you **still** do?! Possibly, in the **past** [or maybe **even** in the present!] you have found yourself sucked into the **middle** of a problem that you never imagined could possibly happen to you? Maybe you cried out to God for help, and it **seemed** as if He didn't hear you? Your problem did **not** disappear overnight – and you **suffered** as a result! Oh, **how** you may have suffered!

Or perhaps your problem is **not** so much with **yourself**. Maybe it is with the **world**. Maybe you remember the holocaust? You think about the carnage of two world wars. You even watch the evening news, or pick up a newspaper and see the **misery** being inflicted upon people in places like Iraq, Syria, **Afghanistan** ... and you wonder...

'Where is God in all of this? Why doesn't he just put an end to all the cruel things that are happening?'

Then you stop and think to yourself.

*'But I am a Christian. I should **not** be thinking these thoughts. God is in **control**'.... but you still wonder!! Is He?!*

This is nothing new!! The prophet Habbakuk had the same concerns 2600 years ago! The **book** of Habbakuk, which we are going to explore

this morning, is only three chapters long but it is amazing how closely it parallels our present-day situation.

Before looking at what it says, let's put the book into some sort of **historical perspective**. After the death of Solomon in 931 BC, the nation of Israel was split into **two kingdoms** - the **northern** kingdom and, not surprisingly, the **southern** kingdom.



The **northern** kingdom, ruled by Jeroboam, was made up of **ten** tribes, and became called **Israel**, and the **southern** kingdom, ruled by Rehoboam, comprised the remaining **two** tribes of **Judah** and **Benjamin**. It is usually referred to, simply, as Judah, and was centred on its capital, Jerusalem.

After the split, **Israel** in the north turned **immediately** to the worship of idols, and, in 722 BC, it suffered the consequences. It was overrun by the Assyrians. We know very little about Habbakuk himself, as he is mentioned nowhere else in the Old Testament, but he was **prophesying** to the people of the **southern** kingdom somewhere between 621 BC and 605 BC. He was **warning** them that, because of their **rejection** of God, the same fate awaited **them** as had befallen their northern cousins.

So, let's hear a little bit about what Habbakuk had to say:

READING 1 Habbakuk: 1:2-4; 13

Habakkuk's complaint – Where are you, God?

*²How long, O LORD, will I call for help,
And You will not hear?*

*I cry out to You, "Violence!"
Yet You do not save.*

*³Why do You make me see iniquity,
And cause me to look on wickedness?
Yes, destruction and violence are before me;
Strife exists and contention arises.*

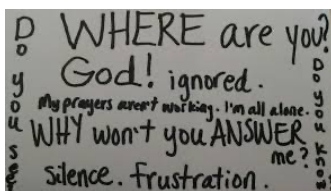
*⁴Therefore the law is paralysed,
and justice never prevails.
The wicked hem in the righteous,
so that justice is perverted.*

*¹³Your eyes are too pure to approve evil,
And You cannot look on wickedness with favour.
Why do You look with favour
On those who deal treacherously?
Why are You silent when the wicked swallow up
Those more righteous than they?¹*

TALK 1



In 'Habbakuk's complaint' we find him posing exactly the same questions as we do today!



¹ Habakkuk 1: 2-3;13

Where are you God? **Why** are You allowing evil to take place? **Why** is it continuing? **Why** do the wicked prosper? **Why** do the righteous suffer? **Why** aren't **their** difficulties resolved? **Why** are you not answering the prayers of **Your** people?

We, today, are **so** accustomed to living in an '**instant**' world that it is difficult for us to **wait** for anything. When a significant event happens, **anywhere** in the world, we flick the remote control at the TV, or click our mouse onto a website, and we get an **instant** analysis of what is going on. If we want something to gratify our **appetites**, there are plenty of **fast**-food outlets clamouring for our custom, or we can go to the frozen food section in our local Tesco and then pop our purchase into the microwave. If we want to **buy** something, but don't have the cash, we can go to an ATM... or there are all sorts of ways to pay on credit – and sometimes the payments will not even begin for several months! If we **want** it, why **shouldn't** we **get** it immediately?!

Instant gratification has become so prevalent in our society that to deny ourselves **anything** almost seems cruel! The attitude seems to be 'if you want it, go for it'. The self **has to** be satisfied as soon as possible. Live for today, for tomorrow we die.

And we are the **same** as Christians! We **long** for God to **change** people's attitudes **quickly**, but He is not **always** a God of **instant** gratification. According to Peter, 1000 years is but a day in God's eyes – which, taken literally means that a year is only 1.44 minutes long! Is it **surprising** then that we long for the light that only his presence can bring, but we are forced to wait in **darkness**? Let's sing...

HYMN CH4 543 'Longing for **light** we wait in **darkness**'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kt3Qc04uIOM>

Habbakuk was railing against the selfishness of **his** day – but he knew better than to get ahead of himself! After he had inundated God with all his moans, he did a very sensible thing. He **sat** on his hands ... and he **waited** for God to give him an answer. Eventually he got what he was waiting for...

READING 2: Habbakuk 2:1-4

God replies to Habbakuk

² Then the LORD replied:

*'Write down the revelation
and make it plain on tablets
so that a herald may run with it.*

*³ For the revelation awaits an appointed time;
it speaks of the end
and will not prove false.*

*Though it linger wait for it;
it will certainly come
and will not delay.*

*⁴ 'See, the enemy is puffed up;
his desires are not upright –
but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness*

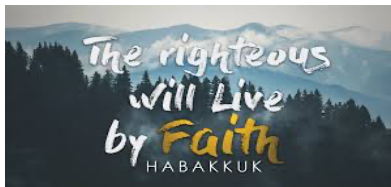
TALK 2



In chapter **1** of Habbakuk, we are told that the **very first thing** that the Lord said he was going to do was to raise up the Babylonians to fulfil his purposes. He doesn't say **what** those purposes are but, given what had happened to the 10 tribes in the north, Habbakuk could probably hazard an educated guess! **Now**, in the reading just read for us, God gives a

second prophesy, and in it he gives Habbakuk the **key** to life! The **key** to the **whole** of the word of God. The enemies of God may be puffed up and full of their own self-importance **but...**

'The righteous person will live by his faithfulness.'



No matter what tribulations are being experienced, the person that is **right** with God will **live** their life in **faithfulness** to Him.

Before he became famous, **Martin Luther** went on a pilgrimage to Rome. Whilst he was crossing the Alps, he fell very ill, and, as he lay sick, and in great turmoil, both physically and spiritually, a verse came into his mind. It was **Habbakuk 2:4** *The just will live by faith*. When he recovered, Luther went on to Rome and did the touristy things that all pilgrims do. One day he came to the church of Saint John's Lateran. There is a **staircase** there that was said to be from Pilate's judgment hall. It was the custom for pilgrims to climb this staircase - but never on their feet. They had to climb it **painfully**, one step at a time, on their **knees**, saying prayers, and kissing the steps where, legend had it, the blood of Jesus had fallen. Luther arrived and started to do just that. But, as he **did** so, he remembered the words from Habakkuk: *The just will live by faith*. Apparently, they hit him like a thunderbolt! It is said that he stopped, stood up, walked down the steps, and immediately returned to Germany. Some say that the Reformation **began** on those stairs.

The just will live by faith. **Faith** is the key to everything! If a man is to live by faith, he must **believe everything** that comes out of God's mouth,

everything that is written in God's Word. We sing it in 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God'. From Deuteronomy Chapter 8, we sing

*Man does not live by bread alone but by **every** word, that proceeds from the mouth of God, Hallelu, Hallelu..jah.²*

Faith **recognises** that **God** is in charge, **not** man.... that God does everything **His** way, in **His** time, and according to **His** will. It allows **us** to place **everything** in **God's** hands in the sure and certain knowledge that He has **everything** completely under control. We just have to look forward in faith. Let's now sing -

HYMN CH4 237 'Look forward in faith'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01rc18AZtl0>

So, fine. We are **stepping forward** in faith. We have been put right with God. But does He **really** care about the wickedness in the world? Let's get a flavour of what He tells Habbakuk.

READING 3 Habbakuk 2:9-14; 20

The five woes of God

⁹ *'Woe to him who builds his house by unjust gain,
setting his nest on high
to escape the clutches of ruin!*

¹⁰ *You have plotted the ruin of many peoples,
shaming your own house and forfeiting your life.*

¹¹ *The stones of the wall will cry out,
and the beams of the woodwork will echo it.*

¹² *'Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed
and establishes a town by injustice!*

¹³ *Has not the LORD Almighty determined
that the people's labour is only fuel for the fire,*

² Deuteronomy 8:3

*that the nations exhaust themselves for nothing?
14 For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of
the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

*20 The LORD is in his holy temple;
let all the earth be silent before him.*

TALK 3



It is clear, from chapter 2 of Habbakuk, only a flavour of which has been read to us, that God is **very** concerned about **all** the injustices that take place in the world. In fact, it **could** be said that they **break** his heart. He **weeps** about them. Chapter 2 details **five woes** of the Lord. Five **laments**, if you like. **Two** of these have been read for us.

Put briefly, the woes rail against the evil actions of the **greedy**, of those who **take advantage** of others, of the **violent**, of those who lead others into **sin**, and of **idolaters** – those who regard some-**thing**, or some-**one**, as being more important than God.

Sometimes God uses evil men, or ungodly nations, to judge His people or to carry out his eternal purposes, but the lesson of Habbakuk is that **everyone** is **accountable** for their own actions. There are **consequences** even for those that God has used. For those who walk their walk by **faith**, there is **life**. But woe betide those that are **proud and selfish!** They will eventually get their come-uppance!

Habbakuk makes it clear that God is **not unconcerned** about the pain of His people. He is not like a coach sitting **ambivalently** on the side-lines

whilst his team is getting soundly beaten! The verses that have just been read for us illustrate this. God addresses the **greedy** man and tells him that he is ripe for **judgment!** He may have won a match, but the league is a different matter altogether. Although he may have tried to **protect** himself by 'setting his nest on high' even his best **earthly** defences will not save him. If the ground upon which he is building his life is sinking sand then, no matter how **grand** the defences that he has built, they will be of little use. Remember that Jesus said:

*³⁶ ... what does it profit a man to **gain** the whole world and **forfeit** his soul?³*

God laments this. The Bible commentator, Jurgen Moltmann once said:

'God weeps with us so that we may one day laugh with him.'

Jurgen Moltmann



The woes of God in Habbakuk seem to illustrate this beautifully. God is **willing to weep** with **us** in **our** distress about what is going on in the world, so that **one day** we will be able to **laugh** with Him **in heaven** when he has sorted things out. Let's sing about this in

HYMN MP 473 'My hope is built on nothing less'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ty8tw7ydxB4>

So, what is Habbakuk's response to what God has said to him? There are **three** verses from chapter 3 which help us to understand.

³ Mark 8:36

READING 4 Habbakuk 3:17-19

Habbakuk's joy

*17 Though the fig-tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the sheepfold
and no cattle in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the LORD,
I will be joyful in God my Saviour.
19 The Sovereign LORD is my strength;
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
he enables me to tread on the heights.*

TALK 4



What do **we** do when we experience difficulties, or when we see bad things happening around the world? Do we, as one commentator has put it,

'stumble in the darkness of our own reasoning, and in the logic of the blind leading the blind'⁴

or do we let God **carry** us through the darkness?

Jeremiah tells us what the Lord's position on this is:

*⁶ 'Cursed is the one who trusts in **man**, who draws strength from mere flesh and whose heart turns away from the LORD....⁷ 'But **blessed** is the one who **trusts** in the LORD, whose **confidence** is*

⁴ Arthur, Kay *When Bad Things Happen* (2002) 88

*in him. ⁸ They will be like a tree planted by the water, that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not **fear** when **heat** comes; its leaves are **always** green, It has **no** worries in a year of drought, and **never** fails to bear fruit.'*

From this, we can draw the conclusion that **every** difficulty which we face is a bit of a **test** – it is a test of our **faith**. Do we **really** believe that God is *El Shaddai*? God '**all**-mighty', The God of '**more** than enough', of '**all**-sufficiency'? The God who's got the whole world in his hands? **That** is what the book of Habbakuk is all about.... so how does Habbakuk **respond** to what he has been told by God?

Although frustrated by God's apparent lack of action, he **knew** that God's power would not be **diminished** in any way **just** because the people of Judah were about to face difficult trials. Sometimes **we** think, "If God is so great and powerful, why am I having such a hard time of it?" But Habakkuk **knew** that this was the **wrong** question and the **wrong** attitude. Instead, he effectively said:

*"I **know**, God, that you are strong and mighty. If, therefore, we are in desolate circumstances it must be because we **deserve** it. So, despite this, I will **still** praise You, and will even **rejoice** in You."*

Habakkuk realised that **he** might not be able to find **joy** in his **under-performing** fig trees, vines, fields or flocks; but he **knew** that God would **never** under-perform. God **never** changes. He is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow and, as a result, he can **always** be relied upon.

Habakkuk **realised** that, because of their disobedience, the plight which the people found themselves in was deserved - but we should not think that that disobedience is **always** the cause today. We serve a risen Saviour who has taken **our** disobedience upon himself. The point here is

not so much one of disobedience. It is that Habbakuk could **rejoice** in God, even in times of trouble. And **so** can **we**! Our final reading is from the first letter of Peter... [

READING 5: 1 Peter 1:3-7

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. ⁷ These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Peter is here **acknowledging** the trials that we **all** must face as we journey through this life - trials in which God may often seem to **us** to be **very** far away... but he points out that God has everything under control. We should **rejoice** in this, because we are heirs of an inheritance which can never perish, spoil or fade. The tests that we face help to prove the genuineness of our faith resulting in praise, glory, and honour when Jesus returns.

In a world of crisis and chaos, God spoke **clearly** to Habakkuk and to Peter, and he speaks to **us** in much the **same** way today. The problem of evil is just as much of a **bugbear** for us as it was for them. How on earth can God permit the innocent to suffer so badly? Is he really in charge of our history?

Habakkuk looked at all the **corruption** of **his** day and asked, 'Why doesn't God **do** something about it?' And men and women of **our** time ask the same questions today in a world where God is being disobeyed left, right and centre.

Habakkuk does **not** give us **all** the answers but his analysis **is** a **positive** one - which is still relevant today.

First and foremost, despite the apparent triumph of evil over good, God **is** in **control**. He **is** the one in charge of history.

Secondly, God is working his purpose out, whether we see it or not. What happens may not **appear** to be good, but because God is God, **everything** works together for the **good** of those who love Him. Those that are called according to His purpose.⁵

Thirdly, God laments at **all** injustice. He **weeps** - and, in time, he **will** deal with it.

Finally, and **most importantly**, as Christians we are to **look forward** in faith. All time is in God's hands. We must walk **humbly** with Him and **trust** in his future plans.

Just as we can be **absolutely** certain that the waters cover the sea, a time **will** come when, as Habakkuk says, the earth will be **filled** with the **knowledge** of the glory of God.

⁵ Romans 8:28

PRAYER

Lord, we thank you that during our walk here on earth you provide us with **glimpses** of the Joy that is to come. The joy that Jesus foresaw when he endured the cross, and scorned its shame, on our behalf.

Help us now, as we go forth from here, to fix our eyes upon **him**... that through the power of the Holy Spirit working within us he may so **perfect** us that people may see the **Joy** of your kingdom manifest within in our lives.

But we pray for those, Lord, who have no knowledge of that Joy to sustain them ... for those presently filled with despair and a sense of deep disillusionment as they live in the harsh reality of this fallen world. May the living Christ give them hope.

We pray for those overwhelmed by grief, for those afraid to think about what tomorrow may bring and for those who simply cannot let go of the things of the past. May the living Christ give them courage.

We pray for those who always feel alone or lonely, for those feeling isolated because of ability, gender, singleness – or even shyness in the midst of a crowd. May the living Christ hold them in his grace.

We pray for those dependent upon others, and for those who fight to care for themselves... for those needing greater support than they ever imagined that they would need and for those who reject every offer of help. May the living Christ give them openness to **his** care.

We pray for those known to us who need the **joy** of Christ's living presence. For those who are ill or in hospital and for those facing

rejection, brokenness, and disappointment. May the living Christ hold them **all** in the stillness of his presence.

And finally, Lord, we pray for ourselves, for **our** hurts and **our** hopes, our fears, and **our** concerns. For all that we must face in the days and weeks ahead... for your faithful presence in all that we say and do, and for the **joyful** knowledge that as year succeeds to year, no matter the difficulties that we might face, **you** are constantly with us, working your purposes out in our lives.

In Christ's name, we pray **all** these things

Amen.

And now let's close our service this morning by singing about God's purpose...

MISSION PRAISE 189: 'God is working his purpose out'
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ms9Fu-O8ZHU>

BENEDICTION

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all ...
today and for evermore.

Amen