

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith... In Today's World?

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[0 : 00] Inevitable and irreversible. Those are two words that are there in the verdict of that report that I'm sure you heard about in the news in August, just last month, by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

Because what they're telling us is that the world's climate has undeniably changed, and even if we are able to stave off the worst effects of that in the longer term, if we act now and do something about it, and that will be possible in November over in the other city in Glasgow at the COP26.

Even no matter what we do in a sense, we cannot go back to even where we were about 50 years ago or so. I have to say that the most dramatic thing that I read around that report when it came out was one scientist saying that all the achievements of the human race in the last 10,000 years, now that takes you right back to the very earliest, even of biblical times, all the achievements of the human race in 10,000 years have happened within a global climate that has gone forever.

No matter what we do, we're not going back to where we were before. So it's scary. Meanwhile, of course, our COVID pandemic that we're still struggling with rages on and is claiming millions of lives around the world and livelihoods even in this country and will probably not be the last.

Because again, scientists are saying that very likely there will be more such pandemics of the same sort where viruses jump from animals to humans. And then we've got Afghanistan and the more forgotten places that we were thinking about just a while ago like Myanmar and Ethiopia and Yemen and Lebanon.

[1 : 53] And so it goes on. And so as Derek was praying in his prayer just a moment ago, we are baffled, we are puzzled, we are grieved by our world and our hearts bleed for the suffering of so many people and our, like, habecox, our knees tremble for the suffering of the earth itself.

And so where can we turn in the Bible as we struggle with these things in our minds and our hearts? Well, this prophet that I've just read from, the prophet Habakkuk, he also lived at a terrifying time in his own era of history in which the same questions that I've just sort of raised about where do we turn, what do we think, where is God in all of this, we're afflicting him.

He lived in a world in which the idols of, in his own country of Judah, a little tiny little country of Judah, was plagued with the idols of lies and injustice and violence, which he talks about in those first few verses.

And as he looked at the international scene, it was a world which was afflicted by the idolatries of international terrorism and war and violence and military power with the great powers of Assyria and then Babylon, which was about to invade Judah.

So it was a terrifying world in which he lived. And so how can we take his little, only three chapters there in Habakkuk, and I encourage you to read it and to think about it in response to what I've been saying this morning and see what it has to say to us.

[3 : 29] And the first thing that I wanted to bring from it is this, if we move on, is that Habakkuk calls us to be a people who look for God at work in the world.

See, that's what he's doing there in chapter one, isn't it? He wants to see God in action and he cries out to God to listen to him because he just can't understand what's going on and why God is doing nothing.

Why are the wicked being so successful? How long do I have to wait for anything to happen? Why do you make me look at injustice? The law seems to be paralyzed, justice never prevails, and it sounds just like our world today.

But God answers him in the second half of chapter one and then on to chapter two. God answers him by saying, in fact, look, Habakkuk, you need to look wider, you need to look deeper, look at the nations.

I'm already there, I'm present, I'm active, I'm at work. Do you see what he says? I am doing a work in your days. Literally in the Hebrew that is, I am working a work already.

[4 : 34] Not so much that he's only just about to do something which he is, but that he's already there, he's already active. God is present. God is not forgotten. It's not as if when we look at the world and are astounded, God is, oh, I didn't notice that.

God already knows. However, the problem is, of course, that when God does answer Habakkuk and tells him what he's going to do, it seems to make things even worse because God says, well, if Judah is bad, I'm going to bring my judgment on Judah, don't worry, I'm going to judge those wicked people in your country, but I'm going to do it by raising a Babylon.

And the Babylonians, as Habakkuk, well, knew were even worse. And they are described, if you read it sometime in the second half of chapter one, and Habakkuk knew it. He knew what kind of people the Babylonians would be.

He knew what his country would suffer if they were to invade, all the destruction that would happen and the death and the siege and everything else. But here's the point, you see, having raised the question with God and having heard God speak at last, he knows that God is still active, God is sovereign, God is in his world.

That doesn't make it any less scary, but he does know that it's in God's hands and he's willing to look and see and wait for that to happen. And so that's my first point in a sense that like Habakkuk, we need to have the courage and it does take courage to have some discernment, to be asking that question, where do I see God at work, even in the midst of the evils and the horrors that are evil to him as to us?

[6 : 14] Where is God at work? And historically, of course, we can look and see that God has been at work even in some of the most terrible times. And remember writing to my friend, Riyad Kasis, who's a Syrian scholar, lives in Lebanon.

He heads up our Langham scholar programs, a wonderful Christian brother. He lives in that, in the mess that the country of Lebanon now is. But you remember a few years ago at the beginning of the Arab Spring and there's awful things that are happening in Syria.

And I wrote to Riyad to say, you know, we struggle with you. We're just wondering what on earth is happening, what is God doing in the Middle East, in the midst of all this? And I said, perhaps we may have to wait 50 years to see the results of what God will have done because I was using the example of China.

Because I'm just old enough to remember in the early 1950s when the communists came to power in China and expelled all the Western missionaries, how the missionary world at that time was convulsed with bafflement.

What is God doing? If all the missionaries have left China, that would be the end of the church in China. You know, they thought at the time, well, how wrong they were.

[7 : 27] The fact is that this morning there will have been more Christians worshiping in churches in communist China than in all of Western Europe put together. The church in China has grown phenomenally in the past half century, in the midst of all the pressures and struggles and persecution that's going on there.

So I wrote that to Riyad and I said, you know, maybe we'll have to wait like in China to see what God is doing. And he wrote back in the way he can, sort of almost gently and humorously rebuking me and saying, we won't have to wait 50 years.

We can already see what God is doing in the Middle East. And how so many Syrian refugees who had come from Syria to Lebanon had been loved and befriended by Christian churches there and had come to feel something of the truth and love of God and of the gospel.

Now, that doesn't make what happens in Syria good. It just simply proves that even when human beings do their worst and when evil was at its worst that God is still at work and God is still building his kingdom, even in such circumstances.

So that's the first thing Habakkuk calls us to open our eyes and to live as those who are aware that God is still sovereign and God is at work in the world. But that moves us to the second thing because it means that we also therefore need to live as people who live by faith because that's the second thing that God says to Habakkuk in chapter 2, at some point you can look at there.

[8 : 52] But in chapter 2 verse 4, we read this famous verse, the righteous shall live by faith. The righteous person, righteous people must live by faith.

Now that verse Habakkuk 2,4, the righteous shall live by faith, of course quite famous because the apostle Paul quotes it in Romans chapter 1 when he's talking about how God has brought us salvation and put us right with God, not by our works, not through anything we can do but simply by faith.

And of course Paul is talking about faith in the Lord Jesus Christ so that as we trust God for our salvation we are put right by God. We receive justification by faith in the classic words of that doctrine.

But that's not what Habakkuk is talking about just here. What Habakkuk is talking about here is that those who have come into a right relationship with God by faith must go on living by faith.

It's only actually three words in Hebrew but it's so powerful. The righteous person by faith or by their faith shall live. They've got to live, go on living by faith in God.

[10 : 00] Faithful trust and obedience to God even in the midst of the evils and the bafflement and the struggles of this world that we go on trusting that in the end God is going to put things right.

And that's you see where this chapter, Habakkuk chapter 2 then goes on. It may seem paradoxical but what God does is that he assures Habakkuk that he will ultimately deal with the wicked, that evil will not have the last word in our world and that even the idolatries and the wickedness and the violence that was there in his world under the Babylonians and under King Nebuchadnezzar, God would deal with it.

Now when you read the rest of this chapter, I'm not going to take time to do it now, you'll find that there are five woes in the chapter and that woe is effectively God saying, I will judge this, I will deal with this.

And there are five of them and the list is surprisingly modern. If you look at them you'll see there in verses 6 to 8 that it talks about piling up wealth through extortion and theft from the nations.

Woe to him who builds this house by unjust gain, you have plotted the ruin of many peoples building up your own house. Well isn't that happening today? Secondly there are those who build security for themselves while impoverishing others.

[11 : 24] Woe to him who builds a city with bloodshed and a time by injustice. Again that's happening all over the world. And thirdly there are those who build cities on the foundation of bloodshed and slavery in verses 12 to 13.

There's a woe against those who humiliate their enemies in verses 15 and 16 and remarkably those who are destroying God's creation. This makes it uncannily modern.

Woe to those who, this is, let me just check again in verses 17. The violence that you have done to Lebanon, which means not just the country but the forests because Lebanon was a way of speaking of the cedars of Lebanon, the violence you have done to the forests and the trees will overwhelm you and your destructions of animals will terrify you for you have shared human blood and destroyed land and cities and everyone in them.

It's calling to account those who are the destroyers of the earth as well as the destroyers of human life. Uncannily modern, Habakkuk 2 verse 17. And in all of this at the end of the chapter it speaks of those who are worshiping false gods, the idolatry that produces these results, which is exactly what Paul talks about in Romans 1 because human beings have rejected God.

We end up with a complete mess that we are in socially, personally, morally, spiritually in Romans 1. But you see what God is saying here is that God knows all this.

[12 : 57] God understands all this and God pronounces a woe against such behavior. God will judge the earth. We just sung that in Psalm 96.

The end of Psalm 96, the whole of creation is pictured as rejoicing. Why is creation rejoicing? Because says the Psalm, God is coming and God is coming to do what?

To judge the earth with equity and with righteousness. And when God judges the earth, he will put things right. He will deal with all wrongs and he will put all things right before ultimately he makes all things new in the new creation.

And that's of course what takes us to the end of the Bible to Revelation, chapters 18 to 22. So trust me says God in Habakkuk 2.

Go on living by faith. Faith in the sovereign justice of God, just as faith in the sovereign grace of God for our salvation.

[14 : 03] God has put us right through faith in his son and God will ultimately put all things right in the final rectification of the final judgment.

Now that's a challenge to us. It's not easy to do that. It's not easy to go on saying Lord, I trust you, Lord, I don't know what's happening and it's horrible and I hate it. But I trust that in the end the judge of all the earth will do right as Abraham says.

But even as we believe that it leads us to our third point that we need therefore I think to live as people whose prayer can include lament and protest.

It's not contradictory to live with faith and to live with protest. You see Habakkuk, this book of Habakkuk stands among many in the Bible, including many of the Psalms as we know, people like Jeremiah, like Job, even Jesus himself on the cross.

Why? Why, my God, my God, have you forsaken me? This voice, this cry of lament, of question, of protest, that's suffering and evil.

[15 : 18] It's there in the Bible and I think sadly we often ignore it. We overlook it. We sort of blanket out of our thinking and our worship. You see, now I hope you don't get me wrong here.

In our churches, in our services, of course, we pray for our government. We pray for our nation as we ought, as we're commanded to by the Apostle Paul and that's absolutely right that we should do so.

Our leaders, our government, our rulers, they need God whether they acknowledge Him or not. They need God's wisdom, they need God's strength, they need the gospel too, of course, because like the rest of us, they are sinners.

They need to be confronted with repentance and truth and the gospel and come to repentance and faith. So yes, we should pray for our country and our leaders and our rulers and our government.

But do we ever pray against them? Because the Psalms often do. Many of the Psalms, when they are confronted with people who are in authority, judges or rulers who are doing wrong, who are doing what is wicked, who are telling lies, who are increasing suffering and poverty, they pray, Lord, will you stop them?

[16 : 34] And they pray against them. Like for example, Psalm 10, arise, Lord, lift up your hand, O God. Don't forget the helpless. The victims commit themselves to you.

Break the arm of the wicked man. That's what one of the prayers in the Psalms, call the evil doer to account for his wickedness. Psalm 10, Psalm 140, do not grant the wicked their desires, Lord.

Don't let their plans succeed. He prays in Psalm 140. And then in Psalm 12, because the poor are being plundered and the needy grown, I will now arise, says the Lord, and I will protect those from those who malign them.

Do we pray those prayers ourselves? The Psalms are full of prayers like that. But I don't know what I ever last heard one used in a church service.

And I sometimes wonder why? Why have we in a sense blanked out the voice of lament, of protest, of crying out to God against that which is evil in our world, even in our own country?

[17 : 40] And I would say that one thing that perhaps both this climate crisis and the pandemic and the violence in places like Afghanistan and elsewhere surely should be doing is bringing back to our attention the importance, the power of these words that God himself has given us in his word.

God has said, look, this is what you could say to me, and I would listen. The voice of grief, the voice of protest, the voice of suffering, and the voice that objects when evil is done and says, God, how long are you going to let this go on?

Why does it go on? When are you going to stop it? I think there's something perfectly valid and not contradictory about both praying for our leaders and in some respects, in these respects, praying against what they do when we know it to be evil.

I think Habakkuk does both, and we should too. And then here's my fourth point, that Habakkuk calls us to live as people who know the story of God, by which I now mean, though he didn't at his time, mean the whole Scripture, the whole Bible, the whole story of God in the Bible.

Because when you come to Habakkuk chapter three, it sounds to our ears all really a bit odd. It is effectively a song. Habakkuk turns, it says Habakkuk's prayer, the prayer of Habakkuk, but actually it's a kind of song because he puts it to music at the end.

[19 : 07] He says, go and play this and sing it. And it's a worship song in which he rehearses in his mind and in his singing many of the great episodes of the past history of his people.

Now, that may not be terribly obvious because when you read this chapter, it's full of all kind of very poetic imagery. We've got smoke and plagues and pestilence and mountains shaking and rivers rising and all sorts of language.

But what he's doing is he's talking about the great saving acts of God in the history of Israel. You will find fairly obvious echoes there of the Exodus, of the victory over the sea, the victory over the Canaanites, or probably also the victory of Deborah over the Canaanites and so on.

So what he's doing is he's reminding himself of the story. Habakkuk knows the story he's in. He knows the people he belongs to.

And so he uses that great story of the Scripture, this great story of God in his worship song to give him hope and faith and courage even when he's feeling angry and afraid as he still is at the end of this chapter.

[20 : 30] So what the book of Habakkuk is doing really, indeed what the whole Bible calls us to do, is to live our lives within the story of God, not just the story of the world.

Now, of course, we have to live in the story of the world. We live here. We've got to participate in society. We've got to belong to our community. We've got to participate in all that is happening around us and be good citizens and engaged and so on in society.

Yes, of course we must. But as we do that, what story is governing that? And the biblical story is the story which in a sense becomes the overarching pattern of our lives, or should be, that we believe in the God who created this world, that we know why things went wrong because we've rebelled against him, that we know God's promise to Abraham to bring blessing to all the nations on the earth, which is a great driving purpose of God through the story, that we know God has accomplished that redemption through the life and death and resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the focus of our faith and who has accomplished that salvation for us.

And we know that ultimately where this story goes, where it leads, that in the end it is a story which ends with hope and with future in the new creation, with God returning to this earth to deal with evil and to bring about the restoration of the new heaven, the new earth, a whole new creation in which God will dwell with us forever.

That's the future that we believe. And so here we have this great biblical narrative, this great biblical story within which we live our little lives and within which we struggle to see God in sovereign control of history now as he was in Habakkuk's day and in the days even of the Lord Jesus Christ and the Book of Acts.

[22 : 22] So we need to get hold of that Bible story. That's why it's so important that in any church regularly, week by week, that you're getting into the scriptures and soaking in this narrative.

Here's the people we belong to. This is the God who has called us. This is the story we're in. This is the future we're headed for. This is the hope we have in the Lord Jesus Christ because that is what gives us security and hope and assurance in a world like we live as it did for Habakkuk.

So that was my fourth and that brings me therefore to our final point, which is that we need to live then like Habakkuk as people who are still on mission for God.

He says you come to the end of Habakkuk's book and he's heard from God and he's sung his song and he's done his worship. Do you imagine that he would sort of end up a little bit like Bob Marley, you know, in that sort of mood.

Don't worry about a thing because every little thing is going to be all right. Is that the mood he's going to be in? Well, no, not at all. He's still terrified. I mean, did you hear the way he describes himself?

[23 : 32] He says my body's trembling, my lips are quivering, there's rottenness in my bones, my legs are trembling. This man is still scared about what he anticipates will happen when Babylon would invade his country when God would bring judgment on Judah as he did in 587 BC.

God brought the Babylonians down on Judah and it was horrendous. I mean, there was siege, there was suffering, there was death, there was destruction, there was bloodshed, there was starvation.

It was horrible. And Habakkuk, in a sense, as a prophet, could foresee that. He knew what was coming and it's scarce and stiff. And yet he says he's still prepared to put his faith and trust in God because he knows that this will be under the hand of God and God still has a plan and a purpose and a future for his people, no matter what will happen.

So what will then he do? Will he just say, okay, well, I'll just sit back and wait for all that to happen. And if I lose my life, so be it, I'll just sort of wait for God. No.

What he says, his last words, verse 19 of chapter 3, is, God, the sovereign Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer. He enables me to tread on the heights.

[24 : 48] Now that's very interesting. First of all, he says, I'm not just going to sit back and wait for God. I'm going to run. He wants his feet to be like the feet of a deer. He wants to be active and busy. Well, busy doing what?

Well, I think what he's remembering here is who he is. He introduces himself in the very first verse as Habakkuk the prophet. That was his job. That was his mission was to be a prophet of God, to be a spokesman for God and to tread on the high places.

Now the high places or the heights doesn't just mean he's going to, you know, go for a little bit of mountaineering somewhere. The heights was an expression used as you can find all through the Old Testament of the place of the idolatrous worship of Baal, the false God of the Canaanites, and all the evil that went with that, all the social injustice, the theft of land like for Naboth because of Queen Jezebel and her worship of Baal.

The country had been riddled with this false God worship, which was leading to such terrible social and spiritual consequences. And the job of the prophets like Habakkuk was to expose that and to put their finger on it and to say that God's judgment was coming and call the people back to repentance, to return to the Lord and to forsake those false idols.

And so what Habakkuk is basically saying here is that's my mission. I'm a prophet. I better get on with it. And he, in a sense, he finishes his book not by sitting back and waiting for God to do something that's saying, I will now do what God has given me to do, which is to be that prophet, to be the one who will run with the word of God, to speak the word of God, to expose.

[26 : 29] That was his job. That was his mission. And he was going to live it out. And so the challenge and the question is, what's our mission? What's yours in this world?

This world that is so frightening and so violent and so unpredictable, in a sense, not a lot has changed since the days of Habakkuk, but in that world, we are still called to be the people of God in everyday life, in everyday work, in our families, in our church community, in this city, and to the ends of the earth.

We are called to be God's people on mission for God. We are called then to be, just to remind us of those points again, we are called to be people of discernment who are spiritually seeking God, looking for the seeds and the signs of the kingdom of God at work in the world.

We're called to be a people of faith, living by faith, trusting in God with all the hard work that that calls for. A people also of prayer, prayer which is real prayer, prayer that includes the word of lament and protest and being real and honest in the presence of God.

And also a people of Scripture who know the story of the Scripture, who know the Bible, who know the story we're in and how it ends and how that gives us hope for the future. And then a people of real holistic, mission engagement in our world for God's sake and for the Lord Jesus Christ.

[27 : 55] So may God give us the grace and the courage to have that, what Paul calls the obedience of faith, to trust God and then to obey him in this world for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ himself and for the sake of the Gospel.

May that be so. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you that you have put into your word books like this one and many of the Psalms and the encouragement of the Lord Jesus Christ and you've given us your Holy Spirit as well to understand these things.

So we pray that you will send us out from this morning of worship with a greater sense of both encouragement of who we are as your people and of faith and trust that you are still the sovereign God of all of nature, of this earth, this planet, as well as its history and of the nations.

And we pray, dear Lord, that you would give us not only faith but also courage and comfort when we need it, as our hearts are broken and as we shed tears over the suffering of this world.

We pray that you would help us to see that our grief and our suffering is nothing compared to yours. As you look at the world which you created so beautiful that we have made such a mess of.

[29 : 11] So we long, dear Lord, that you would return. We look forward to that day when you will indeed come to judge the earth to put things right and when the whole of creation will rejoice to see you enthroned as our King and as our Lord and our Governor.

So help us, Lord, in the meantime to live for you, to go out into our daily lives, our families and our work, determined to serve you and to live in this world as those who know you and trust you.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.