

# NOTES FROM TIM GAMSTON'S SERMON- 28th January 2024 am

## TITLE: "Exploring the language of lament"

TEXT: Habakkuk 1 v 1 > 2 v 1

### Series: Lament and Faith in the Sovereign God part 2

#### Scripture references from the ESV

Habakkuk 1:1-2:1 The oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw.

#### Habakkuk's Complaint

<sup>2</sup> O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save?

<sup>3</sup> Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

<sup>4</sup> So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

#### The LORD's Answer

<sup>5</sup> "Look among the nations, and see; wonder and be astounded. For I am doing a work in your days that you would not believe if told.

<sup>6</sup> For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation, who march through the breadth of the earth, to seize dwellings not their own.

<sup>7</sup> They are dreaded and fearsome; their justice and dignity go forth from themselves.

<sup>8</sup> Their horses are swifter than leopards, more fierce than the evening wolves; their horsemen press proudly on. Their horsemen come from afar; they fly like an eagle swift to devour.

<sup>9</sup> They all come for violence, all their faces forward. They gather captives like sand.

<sup>10</sup> At kings they scoff, and at rulers they laugh. They laugh at every fortress, for they pile up earth and take it.

<sup>11</sup> Then they sweep by like the wind and go on, guilty men, whose own might is their god!"

#### Habakkuk's second complaint

<sup>12</sup> Are you not from everlasting, O LORD my God, my Holy One? We shall not die.

O LORD, you have ordained them as a judgment, and you, O Rock, have established them for reproof.

<sup>13</sup> You who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and remain silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

<sup>14</sup> You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler.

<sup>15</sup> He<sup>[a]</sup> brings all of them up with a hook; he drags them out with his net; he gathers them in his dragnet; so he rejoices and is glad.

<sup>16</sup> Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet; for by them he

lives in luxury, and his food is rich.

<sup>17</sup> Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever?

<sup>2:1</sup> I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint

Holocaust Memorial Day (Jan 27<sup>th</sup>) is a time to remember the 6 million Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust, and to highlight the horror of genocide. Although the world said that this should never happen again, the fact remains that it still does happen. It is a reminder that we live in a world that has never been able to stop evil. For many religious people who take things seriously, this often results in a crisis of faith. Many Jews lost their faith in God because of the Holocaust, thinking that if there was a God of the Jews, he would not have let so many die in such horrific circumstances. This serves to illustrate an age-old question.

- How can a good God, one who is morally perfect and absolutely holy, allow evil and suffering to continue in the world that he governs?

It is a question asked not only by those who have lost their faith, or have never believed in God, but also by God's faithful people through the centuries. When suffering comes in some form, many have asked the question:

- If God works all things for good, then what possible good can he be doing in this?

That is a lament. It is a way that God's people have sought to wrestle with the big question:

**How can a good God allow evil and suffering to continue in the world that he governs?**

Habakkuk's world is one of violence where God's law is being violated, resulting in the oppression of the weak and great injustice. Although Habakkuk had prayed for God to end this, nothing changed. God does not answer his prayer by bringing salvation. From the prophet's point of view, God appears to be happy to turn a blind eye to evil (**vv2-4** above).

When God speaks to Habakkuk (**vv5-11**), it only makes things worse. His response is to tell Habakkuk that

**He will use evil to deal with evil**

It is almost as if God is rubbing Habakkuk's nose in it.

Habakkuk says to God: I hate seeing evil. Do something about it!

God says: OK – you will see more evil

Habakkuk cannot make sense of that (v13), and he continues by saying:

God, you are holy. How can you use what you cannot bear to look at to achieve your purposes?

Habakkuk is struggling with the question:

**How can a good God allow evil and suffering to continue in the world that he governs?**

Still today, countless lives are being lost through genocide, wars and persecution. 73 million babies are murdered by abortion every year, and godly men and women are unaccountably struck down by untimely illness and death. We may have our own current suffering. Additionally, we are not just those who suffer, we are also sinners and have a daily struggle with our sin and the temptations that threaten to overwhelm us like a flood. We are left asking:

- How do we reconcile suffering and evil with what we know about God in his word?
- How do we reconcile it in a way that results in joy for us and honours God?

Habakkuk's prophecy will show us that:

**Lament, and faith in a sovereign God, is the road to joy.**

We have seen (part 1) that God is sovereign and rules not just over the good, but also over the evil that we experience. Take care not to fall into the trap of thinking that, when things are going well, God is blessing you but when things go badly, it is Satan attacking. God rules over both the good and the evil in our lives and he rules over it for our good.

**Believing that God is sovereign and God is good is foundational.**

**However, we also need to make use of lament and exercise faith.**

We are comfortable with the use of the language of praise and thanks to God. We are willing to speak words of repentance and to ask God to act. The language of lament, however, poses difficulties for many of us and has largely been forgotten by the Christian church. We can learn six things about lament from Habakkuk.

1. **Lament is raw honesty.** (vv2-3 above) Habakkuk is hurting deeply and his heart is raw with suffering. However

- He does not go on a verbal rampage against God's people
- He does not immerse himself in a hobby, or a TV boxset or some other form of escapism
- He does not write to the government to complain about how they are ruling the nation
- He does not take to social media and write angry posts against those who are acting unjustly

We might be critical of how Habakkuk speaks to God, but in that criticism, we fail to let his response highlight how we express our own hurt and lament. We may very well resort to the methods that Habakkuk avoided.

**The difference between him and us is that, rather than reaching out to human resources,**

**Habakkuk reaches out to God.**

**He is brutally honest with God about how he feels.**

- 2. Lament cares about evil and God's glory (vv3-4).** Habakkuk is hurting deeply because he cares that
- The poor and vulnerable are being oppressed in a nation that is meant to care about them
  - A people who are meant to show love for each other have become a people known for violence
  - God's law is being disregarded, and as a result, the political and spiritual leaders are perverting justice
  - The righteous people in the land have become fewer and fewer, and the wicked are boxing them in
  - God, who is holy and just, seems to be doing nothing to justify his name, but instead appears to be condoning evil because he is not stopping it.

In our indifferent western world, we need to ask ourselves:

- Does the evil I see in the world cause my heart to hurt as it did Habakkuk?
- Does seeing God's word being disregarded both inside and outside the church distress me?

- Does seeing God's name dishonoured both by pagans and by those who say they are God's people cause me deep sorrow?

**We may criticise Habakkuk for the way he speaks to God**

**but at least he cares deeply enough to bring his hurting heart to the Lord.**

- 3. Lament appears shocking.** It almost appears as if Habakkuk is setting himself up as being more righteous than God (v3), since the implication is that he cannot bear to look at evil because it hurts too much, while apparently God does not seem to care. This is raw honesty. He is not hiding what is in his heart, but how many of us would dare to speak to God like that? It seems to be verging on blasphemy. However,

**God makes no judgement on Habakkuk but graciously responds to him**

- 4. Lament experiences God's grace.** Even if Habakkuk is wrong to charge God with evil, we discover that

**God still listens and responds.**

God shares with Habakkuk that he will use the Chaldeans to purify his people and then he will justly deal with the evil of the Chaldeans. God does **not** rebuke Habakkuk in any way. Why does he not rebuke Habakkuk?

It is because God has graciously entered into a relationship with Habakkuk. Throughout the book, God is referred to as LORD – the covenant name of God, Yahweh. Habakkuk knows that God is his God and that he belongs to God in a relationship that will last forever. Nothing Habakkuk can say or do will break this covenant relationship, because it depends on God's faithfulness and love, not on him. That is why he is free to express his hurt to God.

We know that God can only do this because Christ would come and, on the cross, atone for Habakkuk's sin.

- If we are truly secure in our relationship with Christ
- If we are confident that we belong to him and he belongs to us
- If we are confident that absolutely nothing can separate us from his love
- If we are confident that he will never let go of us because he has eternally purchased us

**then that frees us to be honest with Christ.**

If we know that every prayer, whether of praise, thanks, repentance or hurt, will be met with grace because of God's love, then we can make use of lament.

The Psalms suggest that God expects us to bring our hurting hearts to him. We can cry 'How long, Lord?' and 'Why, Lord?' and in the Psalms he has given us words to speak that express this level of hurt.

**5. Lament is a cry of faith (vv12-13).** By this stage, Habakkuk is lamenting out of deep confidence in who he knows God to be. He knows that:

- God is eternal, as opposed to the Chaldeans who will disappear, and so God knows how all this will work out
- God is holy and this holy God is HIS God
- God's covenant faithfulness to Israel means the nation will not ultimately be destroyed
- God will use the Chaldeans to judge and reprove his people in order to purify them

Despite this, he still laments and that is precisely **because** of what he knows about God. Since God is holy and does not delight in seeing evil, Habakkuk struggles to understand how God can use the Chaldeans to purify his people (v13). The person who laments is not generally a weak believer, but is more likely to be a strong believer who takes God seriously. **Though secure in the knowledge that God works all things together for our good (Romans 8:28),**

**the believer will still struggle with God in prayer as to how suffering and evil can work for good.**

**6. Lament is open to correction (2:1).** Habakkuk has said all he can say, and now he is waiting to see what God will say. He has been honest with God and is expecting God to be honest with him. He is open to God setting him straight. If we are going to truly wrestle with God in this kind of lament, then we need to be ready for when God speaks, and he will speak to us when we pray in this way.

- We need to be ready for when his answer is not what we expect.
- We need to be ready for when he confounds us and shows us that he is going to do things differently to the way we think he should do it.

- We need to be ready for when his answer does not make sense to us simply because it does not fit with how we think God should behave in the light of his character.

How is this possible? If you have the Spirit of Christ in you, then it is possible. The Lord Jesus Christ lamented before his death, spending hours in prayer in the Garden as his Father showed him the horrors he would endure to pay the price for our sin. Christ, in his humanity, shrank back and cried out for the Father to take the cup away from him.

This is lament. Yet at the end of that period of lament, Christ was able to say 'Not my will but yours be done'.

- The spirit of Christ is in us, as believers. We can know a willing acceptance of God's will even when it does not make sense to us.

**We cannot know all that God is doing. What we can do is trust him.**

Lament can leave us bitter and unbelieving (as for example with some Jews after the Holocaust), but there is a kind of lament that leaves us trusting, as we see in the key to Habakkuk (2:4): Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not upright within him,

**but the righteous shall live by his faith**

We can come to a place of assurance that God will work our suffering for good, when instead of venting it in other ways, **we bring the hurt in our hearts to the Lord.**

When we are honest with God in that way, and are seriously wrestling with him in prayer, we will come to know God better. When we come to know him better, we will experience greater faith and greater joy.

**We may not know and understand all that God is doing in our suffering, but we can come to know him better.**

**As we use the language of lament, we will know God in a deeper way.**

- Take time to think about areas in your life where you are hurting, and lift them up to the Lord
- You may have questions about things that don't seem to make sense, but you can bring all that to God.

**Be honest before the Lord and expect him to speak.**